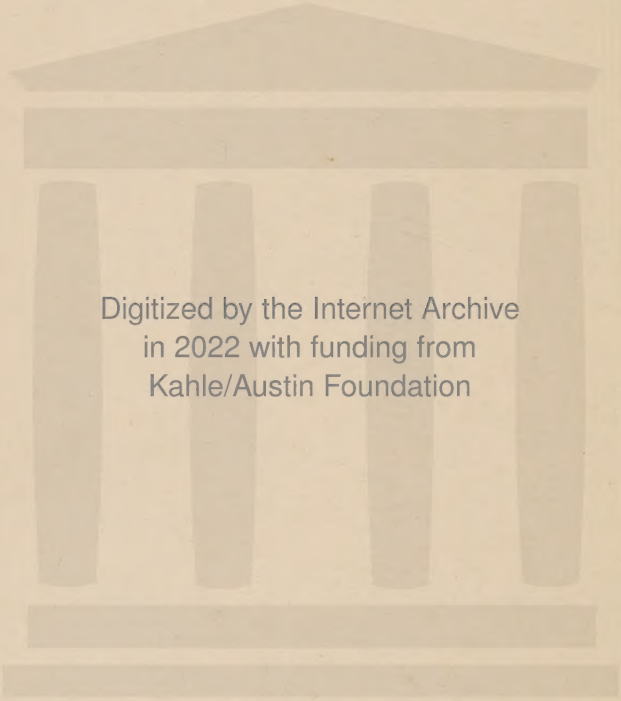

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JOURNEY'S END

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A NOVEL

by R. C. Sherriff and Vernon Bartlett

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PART I

CHAPTER I

James Raleigh, as a little boy, had rather a prejudice against clergymen, dating from the weeks he had spent, at the time of his mother's death, with his Uncle Theo at Carlston Rectory. For Uncle Theodore was a severe man, and one who, coming in the lower category of bachelors, lacked all power to understand children. So that James had to go to church three times each Sunday, and on weekdays to sit or kneel quietly and, to all appearances, attentively, through morning and evening prayers of great length—since Uncle Theo had a fine melodious voice, and knew it.

The boy soon tired of the pattern of the flowered dining-room wallpaper ; by the second day he had exhausted the possibility of discovering likenesses to faces or animals among the bunches of heavy red roses in their wickerwork baskets. The pompous, leather-covered mahogany chairs were more interesting, because the leather was beginning to crack, and, when he was kneeling for prayers, he could tear off little strips, which were rather amusing to chew, and then conceal the fresh scar by smearing it with a licked finger-tip which had previously been rubbed along the floor to collect whatever dust Mary had failed to sweep up. Mary herself presented another diversion, for, while Grace, the cook, appeared to

pray with the utmost fervour all the time, Mary fidgeted, and allowed her thoughts to wander. Sometimes she would wink at Master James, or peer at him through her half-closed fingers, or pull faces to make him laugh.

But Uncle Theo knew his job so thoroughly that he had little need of the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer, and, whenever James had succeeded in forgetting how boring this function was, there would come that ominous pause in the fine baritone voice—a pause which, if it passed unnoticed, was followed by a stern reprimand so biting in its sarcasm that it often brought the boy to the verge of tears. On such occasions, deep down within himself, he would attribute all his miseries—even his mother's long illness—to Uncle Theo.

The Reverend Charles Stanhope helped to dispel this prejudice, for, when he came to stay at Alum Green to leave his son, Dennis, there, before he and his wife returned to India, the house rocked with laughter for the first time since Mother's death. Dennis was then eleven years old, James was eight, and his sister, Madge, was ten. And Dennis had already had a year at a big private school—Whitton House, near Winchester—while Madge and James only bicycled in each morning to small "prep" schools at Lyndhurst. Besides, had there ever been any idea of disputing his leadership, the airgun Dennis brought with him would, of course, have settled the matter for good and all.

Mrs. Stanhope was a tall, beautiful woman who treated the children with the amused interest people

accord to puppies ; but she won their devotion to such a degree that Dennis sometimes became furiously jealous and possessive, and would not let Madge or Jimmy go near her. After all, as he pointed out on one occasion, she was *his* mother, but when she tried to soothe him he merely sulked, and continued sulking until Madge, who could not stand people in her neighbourhood being discordantly lonely or unhappy, managed to get him interested.

" Let's go hunting," she suggested.

And off they went on their bicycles—one B.S.A. and two Raleighs (because of their name)—into the woods. There were steep slopes and bumps, and when they rode over the stump or roots of a tree they were nearly thrown from the saddle. There was one place in particular where the ground fell away so steeply that Dennis Stanhope hesitated to take it, and Jimmy was forbidden to do so on account of his age. But Madge never cared.

" Come along. I'll bet you daren't," she challenged, and away she swooped, over the half-buried, lichened log, under the low branch of an oak, over a dip and a bump that might almost be the remains of a Roman earthwork, and through the narrow gateway into the open field, with its molehills.

Dennis watched her, his breath held. Then, after a moment's pause, he followed her, and for the rest of the afternoon, with a dogged look on his face, he challenged her to tests of ever-increasing severity, until she ran into a stone wall and buckled her front wheel so badly that he had to stagger home with her

bicycle over his shoulder. Meanwhile Jimmy, now a little jealous and decidedly lonely himself, wandered home alone, eating such quantities of elderberries on the way that he was sick, and Mrs. Stanhope had to spend part of the night looking after him.

"Whatever have you got in your pockets?" she asked, as he lay in bed, wide awake, long after he should have been asleep.

When Madge asked him a similar question he was furious, and called her "bossy," but he felt an odd pride in his belongings as Mrs. Stanhope took them one by one out of the bulging pockets of his blazer and put them on the mantelpiece. There were two pieces of string, a twig of crushed elderberries which had made rather a mess of things, a match-box filled with airgun pellets, two damaged Indian stamps from one of Mr. Stanhope's letters, a cigarette card, a postcard of Loch Katrine given him by the housemaid, a long-missing key from one of the sitting-rooms, a policeman's whistle, a penny, a very dirty handkerchief, and a short piece of catapult elastic. All these things took on a new value—valuable though they had been before—now that Mrs. Stanhope had fingered them and commented upon them.

In the other bed, Dennis Stanhope, sent to his room early in disgrace for the share he was suspected to have played in smashing Madge's bicycle, slept soundly and contentedly, consoled by the fruit jelly Madge had smuggled up to him from the kitchen—a jelly with a wine flavour and real grapes stuck in the middle of it.

Although Madge was a girl, she did not behave like one, and was much more of a companion for Dennis Stanhope than Jimmy was. But Jimmy was quite happy to obey orders. He even allowed himself to be tied to a tree as a cowboy prisoner in the hands of Red Indians, and, when they went out shooting, he agreed that Dennis, as the older boy and the gun's owner, should have two shots to his one. Nevertheless, it was Jimmy who procured the only " bag," in the form of a blackbird he hit on the croquet lawn.

" Oh, good shot, sir ! " said Dennis approvingly, as the unfortunate bird fell over, its last worm half consumed. " Good shot, indeed."

Jimmy was on the verge of tears, and Madge was furious with him for killing the blackbird.

" Let's give it a funeral," she suggested, when she had recovered her calm. " I've got a long chocolate-box like a coffin. I only use it to put my gloves in."

Jimmy agreed, anxious to do what he could to make amends.

But Dennis took the lead again. " No ; I know what we'll do. We'll roast it over the camp fire, like real Indians."

" It ought to be buried," urged Madge half-heartedly, for the funeral, attractive though it might be, would be a poor affair compared with real cooking over a fire in the woods.

" It's my bird," said Jimmy proudly. And, as always, falling in with Dennis Stanhope's suggestion, he voted for cooking.

" We could bury the bones," suggested Dennis, and this compromise satisfied everybody.

The cook was persuaded to give them some dripping, and they tried to roast the blackbird on the top of a tin over a fire in Wilman's Wood. Perhaps it was as well that, during a dispute arising from Jimmy's boast that he was a better shot than Dennis, the bird was dropped into the flames, and pronounced, after recovery, to be fit only for burial. Dennis, in one of his father's collars which he found in the dirty-linen basket, pronounced the funeral oration ; Madge, with a beautiful black veil, was chief mourner ; Jimmy was gravedigger.

When the burial service was over, they sat round the fire, smoking dried leaves in pipes made of acorn cups and bits of straw, until it was time to go home. They scattered the ashes, and it was hardly their fault, they told themselves later, that some, not stamped out so thoroughly as they might have been, set the heather on fire.

When Dr. Raleigh summoned them out of bed, they found all the southern sky ablaze.

" Is that your work ? " he asked sternly, for he had heard about the camp fire.

Dennis agreed, almost proudly, that it must be, for he was excited by the flames licking their way across the heather. He paid little attention to all that Dr. Raleigh said about the possibility of trouble with the police, but when he went back to bed he had a terrible nightmare, in which he was in danger of being burnt to death in a prairie fire. Jimmy Raleigh, less imaginative and more practical, dreamt that the police came to drag away his friend and idol to prison.

The fire still burned next morning, and the three joined with the villagers in beating it out with damp sacking and branches cut from the gorse-bushes.

" 'Tis mighty far for a spark from the railway," commented one farmer, and another expressed the opinion that some tramp had started the trouble. The feeling of guilt had worn off, and, as Dennis suggested, they were like secret service agents in an enemy camp. The least word, the least sign of confusion, might betray them, and then they would be scalped and burnt alive. In order to make quite sure that everything was all right, they chose a password, " Blackbird," which they used to each other every time they met. It would have been difficult for anybody to suspect Dennis of causing the fire ; he attacked it with such methodical vehemence that men warned him he was getting into danger, and when he returned home his mother found the soles of his boots had been burnt through. He could not quite feel that her reproaches were justified, because, even if the boots were nearly new, the fire had been far too good to miss.

CHAPTER II

James Raleigh was very proud because, on the afternoon of Dennis Stanhope's arrival to spend his second holidays at Alum Green, his own school was playing its annual cricket match against Mr. Forester's Eleven, and he was captaining the team. It was true that his preparatory school was a very small one, but there was something very satisfactory in arranging the field and choosing the bowlers, even though the blacksmith and Joe Bennett, the postman, knocked up a depressingly large score between them. Just outside the tiny, wooden pavilion, Dennis Stanhope sat in all the resplendent glory of his red Barford School cap. He had only been one term at a public school, but it sufficed to give him an air of great superiority over the youngsters.

When at length Joe Bennett had been run out, and the rest of Mr. Forester's team had been dismissed, Jimmy sent his first men out to bat, decided to go in second wicket down, and came over to his friend. They each had sixpence for their tea, and it went, penny by penny, on ice cornets, which they licked with an air of superior connoisseurship which went well with their important position—there was no mistaking the Barford cap, and Jimmy's pads and new bat were impressive.

"Have a good time this term?" he asked negligently.

"Ripping." Dennis Stanhope was an imaginative and highly-strung boy who might easily have been very unhappy had it not been for his keenness, and his excellence at games. The first half of the first term had been a strain, especially since the combined loneliness and lack of privacy were emphasised by the return of his mother to India, and the knowledge that he now had no English home to go to. But he could not tell Jimmy his difficulties. Somehow it would not be playing the game, and, whatever else he had failed to learn at Barford, he had piled up an immense list of things that were "not done."

"It's a bit rough, especially for fellows who funk, or anything like that," he allowed himself to say, "but on the whole it's ripping."

"I'll be coming in a year or two. Daddy's got my name down."

"Yes, I know. It'll be pretty useful for you, having me there. I'll be able to help you."

"Yes," agreed the school captain humbly. "It's awfully decent of you."

Then he went in to bat, hit out in fine style under the encouraging eye of his friend, scored twenty-four, including four boundaries, and got caught in the slips.

"Jolly good for a kid," commented Dennis Stanhope approvingly.

But, after a day or two of the holidays, he forgot the superiority of his position. The airgun, slightly rusted, was produced, and it was found that even

a fellow from Barford could play at cowboys without loss of dignity. Besides, the two boys built a small laboratory out of cardboard boxes in the corner of their bedroom, and mixed liquids and powders with astonishing results. Mrs. Tucker, at the village shop, had many old fireworks left over from last November and these were useful for experiments, while Dr. Raleigh sometimes wondered if his stocks of methylated spirit and medicaments did not dwindle with unusual rapidity—wondered, and then gave it up, for he was too much taken up by his medical journals to notice very much of what was happening around him.

Camphorated oil was the greatest discovery of all, since it burnt gloriously on water. They tried it first on the well at Jimmy's school cricket field, and were fully satisfied. Then old toy boats were floated on the duck-pond—when Dr. Raleigh, Mrs. Stubbs the housekeeper, and Nolan the gardener, were well out of the way—and flames raged round them. Disaster came when, to let Madge into the secret, Dennis set fire to some of the precious liquid in the basin in her bedroom, and masses of black smoke filled the room and blackened the ceiling. Madge, convinced the house was on fire, ran screaming down the stairs and into her father's consulting-room.

By way of punishment, the laboratory was pulled down, and the airgun was confiscated for a whole week. Necessity being the mother of invention, the boys made two splendid bows and an adequate supply of arrows, and broke three panes in the

hot-house at the far end of the kitchen garden. As for Madge, she received a severe lecture from Dennis for her lack of courage and self-control, sulked for nearly five minutes, and then challenged him to a race (which she lost, as she said, because she tripped over a molehill) all across the Fiveacre field.

Although she could run nearly as well as Dennis, could climb better than he, and bowled unusually well "for a girl," Madge withdrew, from time to time, into a world of her own. She had gawky girl friends, with long, black-stockinged legs and severe pigtails, with whom she spent hours in mysterious conversations, and at tea-time, when girls and boys met round a table laden with heavy home-made currant, walnut, or seed cakes, she would giggle about nothing at all. So that Dennis Stanhope, who had looked upon her almost as his best friend, became sulky and bad-tempered, and alternately blushed or was rude when he met these little girls from neighbouring houses. It seemed to him that they made jokes about him behind his back, and when he saw one coming down the village street he would do his best to turn off into a side lane which led him to places he had no wish to visit, such as the courtyard of the Bank House, or Morden Farm, or the butcher's stables.

"Pity Madge is getting such a silly kid," he remarked once to Jimmy. "That's the worst of girls —always giggling."

And Jimmy, who had much to put up with in this respect, agreed fervently.

Probably it was this feeling that Madge was no longer so frankly understandable which made Dennis confide so much in the younger boy, despite the three years that separated them. Besides, he was a born leader, and a leader needs followers, so that Jimmy and Pat, the fox-terrier, were always welcome company.

One day they persuaded cook to give them some cold sausage sandwiches, onions, and apples (since some bigger boy at Barford had assured Dennis that you could walk all day on onions and apples, and it was felt that something of the sort was needed to counteract the heaviness of the sausages), and they set out on their great exploration. Half a mile beyond Crabtree Farm ran the Highland stream, and nobody—at any rate, nobody in the house—had ever followed it up to its source. The North and South Poles, Central Africa, New Guinea, and South America, were all too far away, but the Highland brook was not a bad substitute for the Amazon.

It ran, first, past the blackened moorland they had set on fire a year before, and through the jungle of Wilman's Wood. The osiers here were so thick that they had to force their way through them as they might have done through what *Chums* or the *Boy's Own Paper* would have called a "primeval forest." And Pat became so excited by the presence of rabbits that he had to be put on his lead and dragged unwillingly along at their heels—as Dennis pointed out, if he were allowed to wander they would lose him, or, even worse, he might betray their

presence to tribes of head-hunters, who would shoot at them with darts steeped in deadly poison, and would stuff their heads as trophies.

The water flowed rapidly over brown shiny pebbles, and small ferns drooped over it, just touched the surface, swayed away shivering, and touched again. On the top of the bank were patches of deep green moss. When you lay down with your ear to the ground to hear if you were being pursued, it had all the appearance of a real tropical jungle ; with a busy life of its own going on, quite indifferent to the presence of two boys who were so gigantic that they were beyond the compass of an insect's vision. By treading carefully on this moss, footsteps were almost soundless, and, when Pat could be persuaded not to whimper, there were frequent rustlings among last year's dried leaves which told of some animal or bird surprised. It was hot here in the woods, and over the less hurried stretches of water thousands of gnats hung, glinting like gold dust in the shafts of sunlight. Every now and then Dennis, who led, started back as a silk thread of cobweb broke across his face. Sometimes they found webs, perfectly symmetrical, sagging a little beneath the weight of a gross spider at least as alarming and as venomous, they decided, as any tarantula. Though neither of them said anything, they were both glad when the character of the wood changed, and they reached a cathedral-like grove of beech-trees, with holly-bushes clustering round their smooth, straight trunks. A little later they were out on the moor, with springy, rabbit-bitten turf near the water's

edge, and heather, cut here and there by sheep or rabbit tracks, stretching on either side of them almost as far as they could see.

Pat was let off his lead, and he jumped, stiff-legged, over the purple heather, as though he were on springs. His barking disturbed skylarks and meadow-pipits ; and a kestrel-hawk, hovering overhead, swerved away in alarm at the sight of this mad creature of black and white dashing to and fro after real or imaginary quarry and so confident that the whole moor had been put there for its own exclusive benefit. There were dark pools here, and the boys, crawling across the grass on their stomachs, were able to see shy trout lurking under the overhanging banks. Water-boatmen jerked their way across the surface, and little dragonflies, striped black and vivid blue, shot to and fro just above the water.

Presently the stream became so narrow that they could both jump across it—although Jimmy twice jumped short and dragged himself out with feet that weighed tons, and were no longer feet, but immense clots of mud. Then came a wide area of whitened grass tussocks, which wobbled alarmingly when one stood on them, intersected by deep boggy channels, which made one think of Jan Ridd's great fight with Carver Doone. And at last they found themselves in a shallow basin among the rolling heather, which must be the source of the Highland.

Near by was a fence and a broken-down gate. Perched on it, they ate their sausages and apples. The onions, after a bite or two, they left to the beasts

of the field and the birds of the air. A breeze swept up the valley and ruffled Jimmy's fair hair, with the obstinate tuft at the back which no amount of water or brilliantine could keep tidy. Dennis, with his cap pulled down well over his eyes, stared at the wide horizon and explained what he was going to do when he grew up.

" Daddy thinks I'll be a parson, but I'm not ' pi ' enough for that, so I'm going into the Army, and if there's another Boer War, or anything like that, I shall attack, and win the V.C. for saving somebody. I expect I'll become a colonel, like your Uncle Vincent."

" I'll go into the Army too," declared Jimmy, who had not hitherto worried about his career since the engine-driver-chauffeur-soldier-sailor periods of his extreme youth. " There's a master at school who knows all Kipling by heart, and he recites it to us when we've been good. I shall be a Lancer."

" I'd rather be in the Coldstream Guards. There's ever so many fellows at Barford going to Woolwich and Sandhurst. They've got special Lower and Upper Army Forms, and they have awful fun in the chemical labs all the time."

" Like we had in our bedroom ? "

" Much better," said Dennis, with true Barford superiority. " Come along ; we'd better be getting back."

It seemed twice as far going back as coming, and Jimmy almost cried with fatigue. He tried not to let Dennis know ; but when they got out of Wilman's Wood to a path where they could walk abreast, the

elder boy put his arm round his waist and almost carried him home.

" You can pretend you're a wounded soldier," he suggested, so that Jimmy's pride should not be hurt.

CHAPTER III

When the Reverend Charles Stanhope came home from India, he bought a little house in Torquay, and Dennis, of course, went home for the holidays. He still wrote rather stiff, polite letters to Alum Green, since an hour on Sunday afternoons at Barford was reserved for letter-writing, and when the weekly bulletin for Torquay was finished he had nobody else to whom he wanted to send his news. But these letters, full of details as to which House was likely to win the Junior Footer Cup, or how splendidly Manning, the head of the House, had battled against the Trojans, served to widen rather than bridge the gulf between him and Jimmy Raleigh. Occasionally a note in Jimmy's round, childish handwriting made him a little homesick for Alum Green, because of the casual details it contained :

" The oak at the corner of the Wilsons' garden has been struck by lightening last Wednesday. It looks awfull. . . . I have a ripping collection of butterflies now with several tortouseshells and pecocks and a silver-washed fritillary I caught just outside Wilman's Wood. . . . Daddy has built a new conservative for his tomatoes and I broke it yesterday with the croquet ball you

chiped last summer when you were here. . . . Madge is getting on well at Brighton, but its a bit dull without her except for Pat who sends you a wag of his tail. . . ."

Madge from her boarding-school also wrote him occasional letters, in a handwriting that leant backwards instead of forwards and scrawled all over the page, to tell him how she was getting on at hockey or cricket, and what a ripping games mistress they'd got. Such letters, although they dealt with a world he did not know and openly despised (even when it slavishly imitated his own), helped to remind him of Alum Green, because, in some strange way, every word she wrote was so genuinely "Madge-y"—she scribbled down her thoughts exactly as they came to her and exactly as she would have uttered them had they been together.

But he thought less and less of Alum Green and the Raleighs, and more and more of his few particular chums at Barford: Little, who bowled so well; Graham, who was very good fun when you got over his shyness, although most chaps called him a "swot" or a "greaser." Kindersley, whose father was a general in India, and who was already one of the best shots in the school. Although he was himself good at cricket, and showed promise as a three-quarter at Rugger, Stanhope was not very popular, for he was quick to take offence, and never took the initiative in confiding in people, so that these three friends, who by chance or persistence had come to know him well, found him devoted and

loyal. When he was not with them they tired quickly of each other's company, for they had little in common beyond their liking for him ; but his presence altered everything. If they broke bounds to bathe in the river, if they made a particularly daring raid on some farmer's orchard, if they suddenly became industrious and all did their " prep." thoroughly instead of sorting out postage stamps beneath the cover of a book on Algebra or Latin syntax, if they discovered some new way of " ragging " the science master, the initiative could always be traced back to Dennis Stanhope. Occasionally, and as likely as not for no obvious reason at all, he would fly into a rage and attack one of them, and then, secretly ashamed of himself, would put on a mask of complete indifference which in the end led to an apology by the victim to the aggressor. But, once that apology had been made, he would, by some little act, show an almost touching loyalty and affection. In the same way he had been known to funk a " collar " at Rugger, and to more than compensate for it a few moments later by a courage in attack which would make any member of the First Fifteen who happened to be watching the game shout almost enthusiastic approval. As Manning, the head of the House, remarked to somebody : " It's a pity the kid's so moody. He's got guts all right when he cares to use 'em. He's got the makings of a wonderful wing three-quarter, but I don't know what to think of him. I shouldn't be surprised if the little blighter didn't write poetry or something."

He said this in a hesitating tone, as though he

were suggesting that Stanhope were guilty of some terrible immorality, and he would have been genuinely shocked had he known that, in point of fact, Dennis Stanhope had written a few attempts at verse, which he kept carefully hidden beneath the newspaper with which he lined his desk.

When Jimmy Raleigh, as a timid and unhappy little boy who found his self-importance at the Lyndhurst " prep " school stripped off him like dead leaves in a typhoon, came to Barford, Dennis Stanhope had already become a dormitory monitor. And this meant that the gulf of three years between the two boys had become temporarily impossible to bridge. Besides, Jimmy's behaviour was so entirely correct and deferential that it would have required a definite effort on Dennis's part to return to anything like their old relationship, and there was in him a strange sort of shyness, often mistaken for conceit, which held him back from making any such effort.

" Hullo, Raleigh," he said, when they met in the corridor just before evening prayers on the first night of term. " Glad to see you here. Everyone all right at home ? "

" Yes, thanks, Stanhope. Quite all right." He had it on the tip of his tongue to tell him how Pat had got rheumatism, and how Madge was in her First Eleven at hockey. But there were other fellows passing all the time, exchanging a word or two of greeting with Stanhope as they passed, so that he let the opportunity slip.

" Whose dorm. are you in ? "

"Thornburn's."

"Same floor as mine. Everything all right? Finding your way about?"

"Yes, thanks, Stanhope."

"Bit strange at first, but you'll soon settle down. Come to me if there's any difficulty."

"Thanks very much. But I'll be all right."

"You ought to be pretty useful for the Junior House matches. Grainger's want some good bats. You know how to hit all right. Get some practice, and you ought to be in the Junior Eleven. It's time Grainger's got the Cup back. Well, see you about some time."

And Stanhope went off to his study, a little relieved to get the first interview over so well. Raleigh was a sensible kid, and realised that things were different now. A very decent kid, in fact, and he'd soon become popular. He had that knack of getting on well with people and making them like him.

As for Raleigh, he thrust into the background a slight feeling of disappointment. He had so many messages and so many items of gossip that Dennis—Stanhope—would have liked to hear. He had not even given Daddy's invitation to come down for any holidays he could—somehow it wasn't done, on the first night of one's first term, to invite a fellow so important as Stanhope to come down for the hols. As for all the things Madge had told him to say, they did not matter. Girls didn't really understand these barriers that you had at a public school. Besides, Stanhope couldn't be expected to

be interested in all her gossip about her own school. And it was very decent of Dennis—Stanhope—to talk like that about the Junior House Cricket Cup. He must practice like blazes.

His thoughts were interrupted by a boy who came along the corridor.

"Hullo," said the newcomer, "here's another of 'em. What's your name? What school do you come from? Any good at cricket?"

He fired off his questions, and gave Raleigh no time to answer them. Then he called to his friends in the common-room:

"I say, chaps, here's another new kid."

Raleigh, acutely nervous and unhappy, but trying hard to appear at his ease, spent an unpleasant half-hour answering questions until the bell rang for prayers, and he trooped with all the other boys into a big room where Mr. Grainger, the house-master, read a passage out of the New Testament, and then led the general recitation of the Lord's Prayer, always a beat or two ahead of the confused echo of it that came from the boys. Afterwards he gave a short lecture on the importance of making the most of the new term, while Raleigh allowed his eyes to wander to the shields that hung all round the room. Shooting Eight. Balliol Scholar. First Fifteen. First Eleven. An immense list of distinctions, dating back to 1880, when the system had been adopted. The most recent shield was only half-filled. Stanhope's name was already there for his share in capturing the Gym. Cup, and for winning the Junior mile.

It was a big shield, with room for some twenty-five more names. How, Raleigh wondered, as he waited at the tail of a long queue for biscuits and milk, could he manage to get his name carved in the polished oak of one of these tablets of distinction? He'd jolly well do his best.

When the ragging in the dormitory was over and he was on the verge of sleep, his last conscious thoughts dealt with this impressive shield, and with Dennis's decency for promising to help him if he needed help.

CHAPTER IV

Raleigh rather envied his chum, Morris, when he became Stanhope's fag. He had not, before coming to Barford, quite realised the barrier that these three years in the difference of their ages would build between Dennis and himself. Had he been in Morris's place he would at least have been in and out of Dennis's study all day long—putting "blanco" on his cricket boots, washing up his cups and plates, tidying the table, carrying his books over before morning school. And sometimes the restraint imposed by the strictest of all conventions would have relaxed a little, and Dennis would have asked questions about Alum Green ; have recalled their excitement when they first saw a green woodpecker, its wings glinting like pure gold in the sun ; have been interested in the local gossip about the squire and the parson and the new motor garage which had been built near the post-office.

But Dennis Stanhope seldom came into the junior preparation room, while Jimmy Raleigh had no reason to be up on the first floor where the bigger boys had their studies. When the two met in the house or on the playing fields, the elder would grin in a friendly fashion and occasionally in the tuck shop he would chuck a caramel or a lemon drop across to him with a—"Here, kid, see if you can

catch." And, since Raleigh could put a magnificent break on the ball, Stanhope often called upon him to bowl for him at the cricket nets.

Then, when Jimmy Raleigh had been at Barford for a year and Dennis Stanhope had become a school monitor, Dr. Raleigh came down for half-term, and almost his first remark when he met his son at the station was—" How's Dennis? You can ask him along to lunch to-morrow."

" But he's a monitor," Jimmy pointed out, with awe in his voice.

" What of it? " asked Dr. Raleigh, " He's an old friend of ours. I'd like to see him again. Besides, his father would be so astonished if I didn't. I'll ask him, if you'd rather not."

The idea rather spoiled Jimmy's joy in his father's presence. Dr. Raleigh was a good-looking man, going white over the temples. He dressed well, but quite without ostentation. He was the sort of pater with whom one was rather proud to stroll round the school grounds. Often parents looked very disappointing, and they wore the wrong clothes, or were hearty with the wrong chaps, or didn't treat the fellows in the Eleven or Fifteen with due respect. Dad was all right about all that sort of thing—or he would be if he would drop this idea of asking Stanhope out to lunch.

Before Jimmy could point out how awkward it would be, they met Stanhope coming out of the Lower Sixth classroom and Dr. Raleigh immediately blurted out his invitation. Now that Stanhope wore a monitor's cap he could go down to the town

whenever he liked, so that an invitation of this sort had no special attraction for him. Nevertheless, he agreed very readily to come, and the meal itself was quite a success, for Dr. Raleigh, sensing restraint, made a special effort to be agreeable just as—though he would hardly have admitted it even to himself—he had made a special effort to look neat and tidy, since he remembered the censoriousness of boys during his own schooldays. He gave Jimmy lemon-squash to drink, but asked Dennis whether he would have beer or cider, and offered him a cigarette when the meal was over, in the most natural manner possible.

"Well, how's Jimmy getting on?" he asked, as they sat over their coffee in the old-fashioned lounge of the hotel.

"He'll get his cricket cap if he tries to," Dennis declared with flattering assurance; "and he's a pretty useful Rugger forward." Then he turned to the boy, "Just a shade lazy sometimes, aren't you, Jimmy?"

It was the first time Dennis had used Raleigh's Christian name since his arrival at Barford, and the boy was tremendously flattered. "Not often," he assured Stanhope, "and I shan't be any more. I'll buck up."

"That's good. You can bowl jolly well when you try. Dead on the wicket."

The hotel existed almost entirely for the visiting parents of Barford boys—it was a little too sedate and dignified for commercial travellers—and what was called the palm lounge was crowded with small parties making the most of the half-term holiday.

Two boys at a neighbouring table heard Stanhope's encouragement, and were obviously impressed by it.

When the time came for Dr. Raleigh to catch his train home, he walked down the main street with his son on one side and Stanhope, in all the glory of his monitor's cap, on the other. This was quite all right, but when the train steamed out of the station and they were left together on the platform, Jimmy felt a little awkward. They walked to the foot-bridge over the railway line and then he said something about running on ahead to get his " prep " done.

" Oh, there's lots of time for that," said Stanhope. " Tell me what Alum Green looks like now. You heard your Pater ask me down there for part of the hols. I think I might manage it."

Raleigh forgot all his shyness and awe, and poured out all the local gossip he had stored up in his mind, item by item, during his months at Barford.

" Remember that green woodpecker we called the ' golden bird ' ? " asked Stanhope, as they turned off the school drive towards Grainger's house.

" You jolly nearly got it with your catapult," Raleigh declared, with a shade of untruthfulness.

A few weeks later, on one Sunday evening after Chapel, Stanhope strolled across the cricket field to the row of elms that separated it from the field through which the Avon wound its lazy way. Bats were not allowed on Sunday, but a number of smaller boys were occupied in coming as near as they could to breaking the rules by playing French cricket with a stick, and a ball made out of a tightly-rolled handkerchief. A few more, to the imminent danger of

each other, were hurling stones at the elms with the help of slings consisting, again, of the clean handkerchiefs which the Matron had put out by their bedsides the previous evening. A sling made out of a handkerchief is not a weapon for accurate aiming, but the uncertainty as to which way the stone would fly merely added to the fun of the thing.

Stanhope watched for a few moments, and then saw the boy he was looking for.

"Raleigh," he called, "I want to speak to you a moment."

Raleigh stuffed his handkerchief a little guiltily into his trousers pocket—when summoned by a monitor he did not dare to put it up his sleeve, after the fashion of the day, lest he should be accused of being "cocky"—and hurried across to the Captain of the Second Eleven.

"Yes, Stanhope," he said respectfully, "what is it?"

"I thought I'd tell you that I've written to your Pater to say I'd like to spend part of the hols. with him. I'm coming as soon as we break up. It's very decent of him to ask me."

"That's ripping," stammered Raleigh. "I hope you'll enjoy it. Of course, it's not much of a place, as you remember, but it's jolly good for bug-hunting. I almost caught a Purple Emperor last summer. And we might go out and treacle the trees at night. If you turn a bike lamp on the sticky patch it attracts hundreds of moths."

He hurried on to recall the attractions of his home, lest his first words of apology about it might put

Stanhope off. " It's ripping that you're coming," he concluded, and rejoined his stone-slinging chums with a certain excusable conceit in his walk.

" His Pater's a great friend of my Pater's," he explained condescendingly. " I expect he'll often stay with us during the hols."

" Aren't we getting ' cocky ' ? " mocked Barlow.

" If you don't shut up, I'll scrag you."

And since Barlow did not shut up there was a struggle which resulted in both boys going back to the house with green grass stains on their Eton jackets, and Barlow's collar had got broken.

" I don't think it was properly made," he explained to the indignant and enquiring Matron.

Jimmy Raleigh only had dealings with Stanhope on one other occasion before they went off in the same train at the end of term, bound for Lyndhurst Road, the station for Alum Green. They met one afternoon near the games pavilion.

" Your name's down for not having turned up for cricket yesterday," said Stanhope. "Why didn't you?"

" I went to the baths, Stanhope."

" You're going in for the Junior half-mile, aren't you ? Were you training ? "

" Yes, I was training in a way. Fooling about a bit too."

" Any real excuse for not turning up for games ? "

" Well, I did swim a good deal. And I'll never be very much good at cricket." He caught Stanhope's eye and fidgeted awkwardly. " No, I don't suppose I've got any excuse. I just didn't want to play, and I did want to bathe. I'm sorry."

" Come to the changing-room after prayers this evening. You've got to learn that what you want doesn't matter. It's what Grainger's wants. And Grainger's doesn't want any slacking about games."

" Yes, Stanhope."

The changing-room was a large place with a jumble of cricket shirts and flannels hanging from numbered pegs, a pair of rings hanging from the middle of the ceiling for " pull-ups " during footer training—rings that were hated by small boys who were encouraged to do an adequate number of " pull-ups " by showers of football boots—and a couple of long benches.

" Bend over," commanded Stanhope, and the unhappy Raleigh stooped over the bench to receive six cuts with a cane, far more severe than Stanhope, so fearful of treating his friends with undue kindness, would have given any boy he really disliked.

" Sorry," he said, when the performance was over, " but it's got to be done."

" I know it has, Stanhope," agreed the other, rubbing hard at the seat of his trousers. " Stings up a bit, though."

" You'd better practise bowling a bit," concluded Dennis, " or else I shall swipe you to blazes if we get a chance of knocking a cricket ball about at Alum Green."

" I've got a new slow break," Jimmy Raleigh declared. " It ought to be good fun. We can make a pitch in the Fiveacre field, and Madge—you remember, my sister—she plays a jolly good game."

CHAPTER V

With their bicycle baskets packed tight with sandwiches and bathing things, Madge, Dennis, and Jimmy set out for Chewton Glen, but in the village they stopped to gossip. There had not been much news yesterday, because it had been Bank Holiday, but it was reported that Germany had invaded Luxembourg, and that the British Fleet had been mobilised. Mrs. Tucker, looking mysterious and dignified, as befitted so important a Government servant as a village post-mistress, spoke darkly of Territorials being ordered to guard railway bridges and the docks at Southampton. Do what they would, the three of them could not avoid the feeling that this fourth day of August was a momentous occasion for a picnic. So that when Madge said : " A penny for your thoughts," she was not altogether surprised when Dennis answered bluntly that he was thinking about the possibility of a war.

She pedalled a little harder to get on a level with him, and they rode together through the long lane between the Scotch firs. Jimmy, who was musing upon Hobbs's wonderful score of 266 at the Oval yesterday, did not trouble to catch them up. The war, if it came, would not affect him very much. Besides, it wouldn't come. Those things didn't.

" I wonder if it would make any difference to you

at Sandhurst ? " Madge said, as the personal side of all these alarmist newspaper reports struck her for the first time. " Mightn't they want more officers ? "

" Sure to," agreed Dennis. " But it will only affect the fellows who've been there for some time. Everyone says the war couldn't last more than three months. The Germans couldn't stick more than that. So it won't make any difference to my passing out. Just my rotten luck."

" I can't imagine what it would be like, can you ? " asked the girl. " Would it be as bad as the Boer War ? "

" Worse. There'd be bigger armies and much more artillery."

Dennis spoke with heavy authority, since he was about to go to Sandhurst, He had finished with school for good and all, and could smoke cigarettes when and where he liked, except that Dr. Raleigh objected that he was an ass to do so.

" It must be pretty awful on the Continent," Madge went on. " You saw what the papers said about the crowds in Holland and France and Belgium. Nancie Parsons and her mother went to the Tyrol—that's in Germany, isn't it ? I'm glad we were satisfied with Alum Green and the Forest and Chewton Glen. My aunt ! Isn't it a lovely day ? It ought to be ripping bathing."

It was only after lunch, when they were lying on the sand waiting for an hour to elapse before they went in the water again, that Madge thought any more of the trouble on the Continent. And again she thought of it from a purely personal point of view.

Dennis would look awfully important in his Sandhurst uniform. People might think he was really going off to fight. Of course, he couldn't be really—that would upset everything too much. But it was rather exciting to imagine that he was being sent off to the war and had just come to say " good-bye." She would tell him bravely to go, and then she would fling herself on her bed and cry, and all her friends would be sympathetic, and impressed because so close a friend of hers was fighting the Germans.

She lay on her back, closed her eyes tight to keep out the red glare of the sun through her eyelids, and tried to picture what it would be like if Dennis got wounded. There had once been a picture in the nursery, called " The Absent-Minded Beggar "—a soldier dressed in khaki, with a bandage round his head. Dennis would look rather nice with a bandage round his head, and his wavy hair standing up above it. But suppose he got killed? There was always danger, always a chance that he might be fatally wounded. . . . It would be awful if anything really serious happened to him, because there wasn't anybody in the world quite like Dennis.

She stretched out her hand until she touched his arm. It was comforting to know that he was there, and that it was only her stupid imagination which had been galloping on unchecked. Besides, she realised with a laugh of relief, how could he be sent to fight? There wouldn't be any fighting for the Army, for Great Britain was an island. Perhaps they'd send him to one of those forts on the Isle of Wight she had visited on summer excursions, and she

would be able to run over quite often to see him. The Germans would never be able to land in England, and even if they got close enough to the coast to shell it, Dennis would be quite safe in one of those forts. So that was all right !

" Time to bathe again," she declared. " I'm sure it's time to bathe."

They sat up to look at the watch, and found that only three-quarters of an hour had passed since the meal. So for a while they all threw stones at a piece of wood that had been washed up by the sea. And Madge was so pleased that she hit it as often as Dennis and once more than Jimmy that she forgot all about war.

But later, when they had dressed behind their respective bushes, and were eating dough-nuts for their tea, Dennis became gloomy, as he did sometimes, and they rode home through the woods each feeling in some strange way that this picnic marked the end of an epoch. Jimmy did not mind if it did, because a war would be fearfully exciting, but Dennis had both more imagination and more knowledge. Dr. Raleigh had talked at breakfast about the general fall of prices on the Stock Exchange, and the probability of an increase in the cost of living. Some rich families round Alum Green were filling their motor-cars with stores of food from Bournemouth or Southampton, in case there were a shortage later on. Dr. Raleigh had refused to take any steps of that sort, but he was obviously very worried. When Jimmy had said that he wished he were old enough to fight, his father had replied very bluntly :

" Damned good job you're not." And the Doctor seldom said " damn " in front of the children.

" Just supposing I do get hurried through Sandhurst into the Army," Dennis said to himself, as they pedalled up the last hill towards home ; " how could I be sure I shouldn't get in a funk ? " Field days at Tidworth or near the Public Schools Camp at Farnborough had been good fun, but it would be different when the other side used real cartridges. How strange it would all be ! And he, in his turn, pictured himself returning wounded from some battle, and being looked after by Madge, who was terribly proud of him because he'd done so well. Perhaps he'd win the V.C. ? There was always just a tiny chance. He'd do his best to make her pleased with him. It was bad luck about her being a girl, because she wouldn't be able to do anything at all. But easily the best girl he'd ever met—not only because she was game for anything and played cricket jolly well, but, still more, because he could be such pals with her, and talk about his aims and ambitions without feeling awkward. And there wasn't any doubt that she was pretty. Sometimes at school the sight of the sun shining on Jimmy's fair hair, or a glint of amusement in his eyes, or an inflection of his voice, would remind one so vividly of Madge's hair or eyes or voice that it almost hurt.

When they got home they found Dr. Raleigh standing half-way up the little gravel drive that ran between rhododendron bushes from the gate to the front door. He was so absorbed in the evening paper that he did not hear them until they were almost

level with him, and the smile of welcome had to struggle against an unusual expression of gravity.

" There'll be war at 11 o'clock to-night," he told them. " There's hardly any chance of the Germans climbing down now."

" Hurrah ! " shouted Jimmy Raleigh. " We'll jolly well make them sorry for themselves, the blighters ! "

" Let's hoist the Union Jack," suggested Madge, and ran off to the lumber room at the top of the house to look for it.

Dennis Stanhope stayed with Dr. Raleigh, reading the paper over his shoulder. It was announced that Germany had declared war on France and Belgium. He felt an immense exhilaration—the feeling that had induced Jimmy to cheer—and, at the same time, an uneasiness, as though he were just about to set out for his first day at a new school.

" I wonder if they won't want us to go up to Sandhurst at once," he suggested, with just a touch of self-importance, since he was clearly so much nearer the fighting line than Dr. Raleigh, or Jimmy or Madge.

" I daresay they will," the other agreed, with rather more readiness than Dennis had expected. " It's not going to be so easy as people think. There's old Mrs. Wylie, at Bracken Lodge, for example—she's been going on at me for half an hour about the treachery and villainy of all Germans, because she once had words with a Swiss waiter at Cannes. It's madness. The whole world's going mad."

When Dennis went back to Torquay he found that his father took a different view, as he explained one afternoon when the two of them sat on a big rock

in Anstey's Cove. That morning, firing had been heard out to sea, and Torquay had been thrilled by rumours that a German submarine had been sunk. All along the coast were exciting reports of people who had been signalling from the cliffs at night, or of German spies who, in the uniforms of British majors, had " turned out the guard," and asked them leading questions about the military formations in the neighbourhood. It had been decided to delete Wagner's music from the principal concert programmes, and Mr. Stanhope, his jovial face red and angry, supported this step as essential if they were going to beat the Germans. He felt that any other attitude was definitely unpatriotic, and he would have nothing to do with an old neighbour who had been a naturalised British subject for thirty-four years, but who still spoke with a thick, guttural accent, and whose name was Hirschfeld.

" Why did he buy a house almost on the edge of the cliff, that's what I want to know? " he demanded.

And since Dennis supplied no answer, the clergyman went on :

" It's so that he can signal to these submarines," he declared.

If he had not so obviously been well over military age, he would have accompanied Dennis when he was drafted overseas in June 1915. Once in the front line he would have bayoneted every German he saw with that cheerful energy which he put into all his (or God's) actions. But, having to stay at home, he worked strenuously on every patriotic committee that

he could find. One day he was leading a party across Dartmoor in search of sphagnum moss for medical dressing ; another saw him active as a special constable ; on yet another he was organising the local Appeals Committee, or addressing a recruiting meeting, or arranging a tea-party for wounded soldiers, or running a Press campaign for the internment of yet more people with a thin strain of German blood in their veins. By the end of the war he had quite a collection of certificates, signed by various notabilities, to declare that he had helped his King and Country, and he had lost much of his weight and most of his joviality in his conscientious efforts not to infringe any one of the food regulations and injunctions which were drafted for the hapless civilian.

CHAPTER VI

Dennis Stanhope was in a support trench near Hooge when a message reached him that he was to go on leave. It was in December 1915, and he had been six months out at the front. When the news came he was hard at work making a doorstep which would prevent the water from streaming down the three steps which led to the relative security and homeliness of an unusually muddy dugout. All the morning the Germans had been sending over rifle grenades and minnies, but the rain was so icy cold that he had not worried overmuch about what journalists at home would probably call the " hail of steel."

In a moment, however, his sense of values was changed. These plays that figured so largely in the illustrated papers his mother sent him ceased to be as remote and improbable as fairy tales—in twenty-four hours he would be in London and would be able to choose between them of his own free will. Taxis were no longer legendary chariots of the remote past. He would be able to put up at the club in St. James's Square of which he had become a country member, and order a breakfast of grilled kidneys and bacon from a neat waitress with clean apron and white cap. The sleet became almost pleasant because it heightened the contrast between to-day, when he looked

out only on desolation, and to-morrow, when he would look out into wet streets which reflected the dim, war-darkened lamps of London. The merest rifle-grenade became terrifying, and he stared up into the sky with more anxiety than anyone else in the trench, ready to bolt when he heard the " click " of the *Minenwerfer* and saw the great, black shell come twisting erratically down towards him. When a bullet hit the sandbag at the top of the parapet with a sharp crack, he ducked shamefully in his anxiety lest something should stop his leave, and when he started off down the communication trench to transport lines, to borrow a horse to take him over to Bailleul station, he broke into a trot until he met a Staff officer who stared at him in disgust, for gentlemen who held His Majesty's commission did not run in communication trenches, at any rate away from the firing line.

The leave train was crowded with cheery souls, who became yet more cheery when they had got safely past the Embarkation Officer at Boulogne without being told that their leave was cancelled. A Pullman car brought them up to London, where they showed their yellow railway passes from " France to London " and separated for their various destinations, wasting not a moment of their precious five days.

Stanhope stayed the night at the club and went with a fellow he met there to see George Robey. They shouted at his jokes and made a dozen friends or so at the bar of the theatre. After the show they decided to walk back to the club, and tramped un-

dismayed through the blinding rain while Londoners huddled up in coats and waterproofs and sheltering beneath dripping umbrellas, hurried unhappily past them. What did a little rain matter when you had a decent bed with clean sheets to sleep in ?

But by the next day some of the exhilaration had worn off. The leave was so unrelentingly short that it did not seem worth while beginning anything. It was so obviously impossible to crowd in half the things they wanted to do. Besides, people looked at their muddy, patched uniforms with sympathy, but without understanding. There could be no comprehension between respectable, elderly gentlemen, with the hats, armlets and truncheons of the Special Constabulary, who guarded reservoirs and railway bridges, and their sons home on leave from the front. Dennis's father and his old friends at the local club were so revengefully patriotic, so anxious to drag out of him accounts of German atrocities, even if they were not authenticated, that he was almost relieved when his leave came so near to its end that he could return to London without hurting his mother's feelings.

Jimmy Raleigh was at Barford, so there was no chance of seeing him, but Madge was working in a hospital at Bournemouth, and he had written to her, a little diffidently, to suggest that she might be able to get up to London for a day. By starting before breakfast, she reached Waterloo a little after 10 o'clock, and he had until 2 o'clock before his leave train left Victoria. As he waited for her on the platform, he decided they would crowd so much

into those four hours that they would have a store of memories to keep them both contented until his next trip home.

The train came in, and his heart beat in a queer, irregular way as he decided she was not among the passengers. Then, a moment later, he saw her and everything was all right again. She was no longer the plump, round-faced tomboy, but a tall slender girl. She had been pretty as a kid—and especially when they had last met during that last brief holiday at Alum Green eighteen months before—but now she was so beautiful that her beauty put a barrier between them. She came to meet him with the same frank pleasure in her blue eyes, but he felt awkward and shy, almost frightened.

" Why, Dennis," she said, " how you've grown ! No—not any taller, I don't mean that. But you've become so old, somehow. So much of a man. No, I don't even mean that—it sounds like an aunt talking to a schoolboy. You know what I mean all right, don't you ? And what fun to see you again."

The sentences fell over themselves in her hurry to tell him she was glad to be with him. And he could only stammer " Yes " or " No " as the case might be, and could find no words to say what he thought of the change in her. He stared at her hair, which, escaping from under a tight little hat, shaped like a French soldier's *képi*, glinted so warmly in the cold, winter sunshine. Stared at it until she asked him what was the matter, and fumbled in her bag for a little mirror. And even then he could only say : " The

matter? Why, nothing at all," in a colourless sort of voice which expressed nothing of his feelings.

"Well, let's see," she said, when it looked too foolish for them to stand on the emptying platform any longer. "We've got nearly four hours. What shall we do?"

He realised with a shock that he had planned nothing for her. But London wasn't like Alum Green, where you came to quiet woods, or an open sweep of moorland in whichever direction you went. What could one do in London?

"There's lunch," he suggested. "I thought we might get a spot of lunch in one of those little Soho restaurants. You know, Italian or French. Queer sorts of places."

"Yes, that would be fun. But," she laughed, "we can't lunch yet. It's only a quarter past ten."

They thought of the Zoo, but many of the animals had been destroyed owing to the shortage of food, and, besides, they both hated the sight of wild things shut up in cages. Dennis suggested looking at the shops, because he thought a girl would like that sort of thing—and he might pluck up courage to buy her something she wanted. Madge suggested some picture gallery, because she was sure shops would bore him —and she felt he had some idea of a present in his mind, and did not want him to spend his pay on her. In the end they took a taxi to Piccadilly Circus, and walked along Piccadilly, where they met so many people in khaki, from generals to privates, that Dennis seemed to spend his whole time saluting. It gave him no time to talk to her, but she walked along

quite contentedly, thinking how much smarter he looked with the two stars on his sleeve, than all these majors and colonels. It would be nicer, of course, if they had been in the country—strolling along that path through Wilman's Wood, for example—but she must not grumble during these few hurrying hours.

"These beastly pavements!" was all she said about her thoughts.

"A darned sight better than all that *pavé* in France." He laughed a little grimly; and she had a vision of an unending stream of dead-weary men trailing over miles of rough roads. And in a few hours he would be on his way to the Front again. Oh, *why* couldn't she talk frankly to him, say all she thought, all she felt? What was the good of speech, since words would not mean to him the same as they meant to her? And here they were, wasting their few precious minutes walking along Piccadilly, separated by those barriers of speech and convention. He was too busy taking the salute to guess how much she wanted to go hand in hand with him. Hand in hand in Piccadilly, with its stolid or pretentious clubs built up in great cliffs of brick? How absurd! If only they had been in Alum Green!

Once they reached Hyde Park they felt a little more at home. Here were real trees, and flowers, and grass. They walked round the Serpentine and, a dozen times at least, he hesitated with the words which would destroy this barrier between them on the tip of his tongue. But, now that he found he cared for her, she looked unapproachable in her beauty.

In the taxi that took them to their little restaurant in Frith Street, he sat as far away from her as he could, since he dared not sit close to her. And both of them were thinking how quickly and relentlessly the minutes were marching by.

The hovering presence of the waiter at lunch was almost a relief. He was a fussy little Frenchman, long over military age, and his anxiety to know if Monsieur le Lieutenant wanted this, or if Madame was satisfied with that, made talking impossible, although at the same time it made conversation easy. She chatted away brightly about Alum Green, and life in the hospital in Bournemouth where she was working, and he gave his orders airily in a French which was not too bad, and which she thought even better than the waiter's. But, had they talked, each would have confessed love for the other, and that confession could not be made in a frowsy little restaurant with advertisements for wines or vermouths round the walls, or even outside in the streets, with their millions of watching windows.

They sat for a long time over coffee, each fearing to suggest a move, since a move could only be in the direction of the station. But suddenly he had an idea. If they took a taxi to Charing Cross they could walk along the Embankment part of the way to Victoria. It would be good to see water again.

"Ought we to have a taxi?" she asked doubtfully. "The tube's so much cheaper."

And he wished that taxis cost ten times their price so that he could have the satisfaction of spending something on her.

On the Embankment they could more or less forget London. The December mist hid the squalor of the buildings of the south side, leaving only their dim outlines beautifully visible. If Dennis had not feared to sound sentimental, he would have suggested that the Houses of Parliament ahead of them must really be a fairy palace, to which he was going with his princess. Overhead swooped seagulls, and there was the faintest tang of salt in the air from the rising tide. This dirty water, with its miserable scraps of wreckage and rubbish, would taste of the sea. A gull shot past them, and hovered above a piece of floating board.

" D'you remember the gulls at Chewton Glen," he asked, " that last day before the war ? "

She nodded, for she dared not speak. It was all right again now. Those gulls helped them to forget London. Somehow she slid her hand in his, and they dawdled along thus until she insisted that it was time for them to go. Dennis, so punctilious and so keen on discipline, would gladly have missed the leave train rather than bring this half-hour to an end.

The platform at Victoria was crowded, and the business of getting his kit and finding a seat kept them occupied almost until the moment of parting. They avoided each other's eyes, and talked of futilities until the call came for the passengers to take their seats. They shook hands with stiff, awkward solemnity, as though the unchecked display of the emotions of others during these last few seconds embarrassed them. He withdrew his hand, and half turned to get into his carriage. And then, suddenly, she was in his

arms, her forehead pressed so hard against the regimental badge on his collar that she almost cried out for the pain—and yet pressed all the harder.

"My dear," she whispered, "I love you. Come back safe."

"Rather! Good-bye, darling."

And a few seconds later she was one of a pathetic crowd of women, standing on a dingy platform at Victoria, and waving handkerchiefs at a departing train.

CHAPTER VII

Dennis Stanhope fidgeted about after breakfast until his mother looked up from her depressing study of the casualty lists in *The Times*. It was a wonderful morning in June 1917, and from the breakfast-room she could see the red cliffs above Oddicombe Beach, and a long series of headlands beyond, until the coastline was lost in the morning haze. But she could never forget that beyond this peace was the unending, destructive rumble of guns. And she could never leave the breakfast table until a careful study of the casualty lists had assured her that men and boys she knew had been granted one more day's respite. At any rate she had Dennis safe in England for three more days, but she hated the war with an intense hatred, almost astonishing in so calm and beautiful a woman, for if it had not taken her only son away from her, it was changing him as relentlessly as fire will twist and distort bars of metal.

"Well, Den, old boy, what is it?" she asked.

"Nothing much. It's only I was thinking I might trot over to Barford to-morrow. It's an Old Boys' match of sorts, you see, and it might be rather fun to play in it. They'll have a fearful job to scrape up a team. But of course leave's short, and if you or Dad had planned anything particular. . . . I mean, it

doesn't really matter. I could get back the day after to-morrow, and have a last day here."

Leave's short ! Leave's short ! Dear God, how short it was ! She looked forward to it so anxiously, and the months went by so slowly. Sometimes she prayed that Dennis might get wounded, and so come home before the appointed time. Then, quickly, she prayed that his body might come through it all unscathed, even though she had to wait years before his next leave.

But he was nervous, and jumpy, and irritable. His mind and soul were not unscathed. Perhaps a visit to Barford would do him good. There were still boys there whom he knew—Jimmy Raleigh, for example —and the atmosphere of the place ought to be restful. She would have to let him go.

" It's an excellent idea, Den," she declared. " It will do you a world of good to get a decent game of cricket again. I'll talk to your father about it. He'll be sorry not to see more of you, as I am, but he'll understand." Charles must not be allowed to object, or to show too clearly how much they regretted each of these hours of leave that was stolen from them. " That will be quite all right. You'll be pretty useful to the Old Boys' team, too. Score a century."

When Dennis had gone to the post-office to telegraph to Barford, his mother stood on the step that led down from the French windows of the morning room to the little strip of lawn that had not been dug up for potatoes. She paid an absurd amount of attention to this one patch of turf. After it had been newly mown and rolled a glimpse of it, when she

was dusting the room, would remind her of county cricket matches when Dennis was a little boy ; a little grandstand with flower-boxes full of geraniums ; a wide circle of wooden benches crowded with men with field-glasses and women with long, flouncy dresses, big flat hats and sunshades ; a few men in clean, white flannels moving purposefully about the field ; Dennis running up to her at the end of the tea interval bubbling over with excitement because he'd got C. B. Fry's autograph. Then she'd always had, in the back of her mind, the knowledge that so soon he'd be going back to school and she'd be going back to India. Now she stayed at home, and waited, while he went back once more to the Front. Looking at that strip of turf this morning she seemed to see an Old Boys' team coming out to field—some on stretchers or crutches, one groping blindly, some with nervous tics, some with drawn, tired faces and eyes glazed with fatigue. An Old Boys' team ! She laughed bitterly to herself, told herself not to be a fool, and went off with determined cheerfulness to explain to her husband how much good it might do Dennis to spend a few hours at Barford.

It was funny, Stanhope reflected, how small everything looked now. In the little town—which had been so attractive because it was out of bounds and could only be visited on very special occasions, unless you were a monitor—he came across the first boy wearing the Barford cap, a boy so small that he would hardly have looked out of place in a perambulator. The distance between the town and the school had shrunk from a good mile to a poor

half-mile, and the Big School and the School Chapel had become relatively unimportant buildings which no longer rivalled the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey. It all felt as though he were visiting a Lilliputian city of which he had once, before growing to his present statue, been a citizen.

He left his motor-bicycle outside the porter's lodge, after a few words of explanation to a porter he had never seen before, and walked up the drive. Fellows were just coming out of morning school, and he scanned their faces anxiously in search of someone he knew. They on their part tried hard to be perfect little gentlemen and not to stare, but they could not resist the temptation to look round as soon as he had passed.

"He's a captain . . . must be an Old Boy. . . . Look, he's got the Military Cross. . . . I bet you it is . . . Yes, white and purple . . . By Jove, the Military Cross ! That's the next thing to the V.C. . . . No, it isn't . . . Yes, it is . . . Of course I know, because my brother's a regular . . . I believe it's Stanhope. I saw his photo in the O.B. Magazine and he got the Military Cross . . . That's it . . . I bet it's old Stanhope . . . good old Stanhope ! "

In front of the main tower Dennis Stanhope stopped for a moment to look about him. He had not been tremendously happy at school. There had been great satisfaction when he had won his cap, or played particularly well in a match, but there had also been revolts against a system which compelled you to do, almost to think, exactly the same as everyone else. And yet the things that

had worried him all seemed so unimportant now. How would it be if only he could forget all about the last two years of waste and muddle, worry and dirt, and find himself back here again, with his old study at Grainger's house, his old friends, his old preoccupations? But the last two years were a barrier which cut him off for ever.

"Good Lord, it's Dennis!"

He swung round to find Jimmy Raleigh in front of him—Jimmy so excited that, in his hurry to shake hands, he dropped all his pile of books. Stanhope helped to pick them up. In some absurd way he felt so moved that he could only talk for the moment of unimportant matters. He held up a rather battered and ink-stained volume.

"*Statics and Dynamics*," he laughed. "Still at it! You poor blighter!"

"It's my last term, though. Then I'll be able to join up. I say, it was ripping about your Military Cross. Madge was awfully bucked. She'll be sick to death at missing you. You've not come across her hospital yet, have you?"

"No, she's in another sector. Perhaps I'll see her out there some day. It would be great fun." He tried to speak quite casually, but he felt himself blushing, and changed the subject.

"How's old 'Pimples' getting on?" he asked.

"Just the same silly ass as ever. He's been giving a fearful lot of 'impots' this term. Keeping his whole class in for nothing." There was ever so much gossip about Barford which he wanted to tell Dennis. But the inch of ribbon fascinated him.

" How *did* you get the Military Cross ? " he asked. " The *Gazette* talked about ' conspicuous gallantry ' on Vimy Ridge, or something of the sort. Do tell me about it."

Dennis made an unexpected movement of impatience.

" For God's sake, shut up about it. I'm fed up with the whole business."

But Jimmy, who had always understood in the old days, did not understand now.

" You always were a modest sort of blighter," he laughed, and then went back to the subject that interested him above all others. " What's it really like out there ? " he asked.

What could one do ? Talk of the mud ? The long hours of waiting ? The fatigues ? The noise and the lack of privacy ? But Jimmy would never understand. This cursed war had built a barrier between them, a barrier which he could never cross however often he came down to Barford to play in cricket matches, which would cut him off from Jimmy until Jimmy's own turn came to go overseas. And by the time that happened . . . ? Well, after all, one stood a pretty poor chance of sticking another year out in France.

" It's pretty beastly at times," he explained lamely. " But we have an awful lot of ragging when we're out of the line."

" Yes, I've heard that," the other agreed. " A good deal better than sitting in some stuffy old office. I hope it lasts until I get out."

" It'll do that, my lad ; never fear," commented

Stanhope grimly, as they turned in at the drive of Grainger's house.

" Pimples," as the housemaster was always called behind his back, was delighted to see so distinguished an Old Boy, and he proudly pointed out the fact that Stanhope's winning of the Military Cross was already recorded on the Honour boards. He talked of the fellows from his house who had been knocked out—he called them " heroes " who had " fallen " —with a kind of gloating satisfaction, which made Stanhope feel slightly sick. It was good fun meeting chaps he had known at Barford, even though many of them who were now monitors or in the Cricket Eleven had then been insignificant little kids whose names he had not even troubled to learn. And several other masters had, at any rate, the decency and the tact to say as little as possible about the war. But throughout the cricket match he had a feeling of unreality which prevented him from fielding with any distinction. Besides, he had lost his eye in France, and couldn't hit straight any more. He allowed himself to be bowled by Ward, a measly little skunk who had been in his own dormitory during his last term at Barford, and retired, a little sulkily, to the pavilion.

After tea he persuaded " Pimples " to let Raleigh off evening preparation, and the two of them went for a walk along the canal. It was a quiet, still sunset, with minute silvery clouds flecking the western sky. Moorhens ran clumsily through the rushes and started widening ripples which spread across the smooth surface of the canal to the farther bank. Now

and then an early bat swooped past them erratically. There was a sleepy, chirping quarrel among the sparrows in the ivy on Farmer Pring's barn. Here was the elm-tree in which he and Jimmy had found the flycatcher's nest during his last spring term ; there the dark patch under the bridge where they had fished vainly for hours. Above the canal rose the fine sweep of Hangman's Hill, crowned with its tall, quiet beech-trees. It was all so peaceful, and in some odd way, so important, that the war became a trivial thing which did not really matter.

" Remember the day we went up to the source of that stream at Alum Green ? " he asked.

" The Highland ? " said Jimmy. " Rather ! By Jove, though, wasn't I tired ! "

They both laughed. Perhaps, thought Dennis to himself, this barrier was not insurmountable after all. But Jimmy's next remark dispelled the illusion.

" It's awfully exciting," he said, " but sometimes, when the wind's in the south-east, you can hear the rumble of the guns in Flanders from the top of Hangman's Hill."

" Can you ? "

" Yes. People wouldn't believe it. But it's true all right. Lots of us went up there a few months ago, and there wasn't any doubt about it. It was fearfully exciting."

Stanhope made no reply. After all, Jimmy would learn, poor little devil ! And, in any case, there wasn't any point in talking about the war. When they turned to go back to school, Stanhope was just as anxious to arrive in time for prayers and supper

as Jimmy was himself—it was so pleasant to change, for once in a way, the organisation to which you owed obedience. " I'll come up to your study afterwards," he promised.

" Good. We'll make some cocoa over the gas burner. I've got a new sort that doesn't want milk. It's so hard to get milk."

But after prayers old Grainger made it clear that he expected Stanhope in his own study for what he called, with an attempt at geniality, " a good powwow." Reluctantly he agreed that his visitor should be allowed to spend a quarter of an hour with Raleigh.

Jimmy now had one of the best studies in the house. It was panelled with varnished deal, and Stanhope discovered, with something of a shock, his own initials cut deep in the wood just behind the door. He had almost forgotten that he had once shared this little, square room with Treherne, who had been killed in the second battle of Ypres. In those days they'd had flowered cretonne curtains which he preferred to Jimmy's severe casement cloth, and the hunting pictures round the walls had been replaced by framed colour prints, one showing men in khaki climbing out of an incredibly neat trench to charge, another depicting a German Zeppelin hurtling down in flames, and a third giving a highly impossible version of a British armed trawler putting up a magnificent fight against overwhelming odds in the shape of several units of the German Fleet. Perched conspicuously on the top of the bookcase was a photograph in a silver frame, surmounted by the

regimental badge, of Stanhope himself as a very self-conscious second lieutenant.

Jimmy Raleigh clambered up on to the table and hung a little saucepan on to a wire above the gas burner. The possibility that the housemaster might come round to fetch Stanhope made this breach of rules all the more exciting, and thereby improved the flavour of the cocoa, but, to be on the safe side, Crane, one of the fellows invited in for the occasion, scattered a few nutshells on the floor of the corridor which led to old "Pimples'" part of the house.

But this return to breaches of school discipline did not give Stanhope the repose for which he longed. He made it clear that he himself did not want to talk about the war, but the conversation turned back to it the whole time. Six masters had joined up, and little Marshall, the maths. master whom they had ragged so unmercifully, had somehow won the D.S.O. Ever so many fellows, including Raleigh himself, were leaving school at the end of the term and the war had become so much a part and parcel of their lives that they hardly considered the question of what sort of career was to follow it. Davis, Lethbridge, Woods, Northcote—so many of Stanhope's contemporaries—had been knocked out, and one, Wilkinson, had disgraced the whole school by going to prison, with much *éclat*, as a conscientious objector. In the O.T.C. now they learnt all about trench-digging, and traverses, and the trajectories of guns. It was all very important, very exhilarating, and yet, in some indefinable way, very remote from any

conception of the real thing. Mud, when talked of over here in England, sounded romantic.

The nutshells cracked, the cocoa and cups were quickly hidden, and old Jackson, Grainger's "scout," slid into the study. He addressed Stanhope as "sir," and told him that Mr. Grainger was waiting for him downstairs. There was no escaping the ordeal.

"Cheero, Jimmy," Stanhope said as he stood in the doorway. "See you soon. Mind you get into my battalion."

"By Jove, don't I just wish I could!"

"Good luck!" said Crane. "Knock the stuffing out of the old Boche."

"And get a D.S.O. as well as the M.C.," was the advice of Drew, the other guest in Jimmy's study.

Dennis Stanhope followed Jackson along the dark corridor to the private part of the house, down to the hall, where he had so often waited for interviews, generally unpleasant, with old Grainger, and then made his way down into the big, gloomy room with all its photographs of Oxford undergraduate groups in the 'eighties. The master could be distinguished in them as a weak-faced individual with fluffy side-whiskers and spectacles. An oar above the fireplace showed that he had once rowed for Pembroke, but, looking at him, one found this hard to believe. In the corner cupboard were the canes, and round the walls were the little framed mottoes and texts which the old man so often condemned boys to copy out five hundred times. Exercise books lying open on his desk bore the terse, caustic comments in red pencil which had made him famous.

To-night, however, he was genial to excess. Now that Stanhope was a captain, he could be consulted on so many important house matters. There was the question about increasing the number of studies, for example. And the new Head's idea of allowing boys to wear ordinary suits instead of Eton jackets on Sundays. And the number of hours a week which should be devoted in war-time to the O.T.C. And the lamentable way in which boys in the lower studies had taken to smoking on the sly. And the very important problem of what boys should be allowed to use the tennis courts.

Stanhope realised that, in a roundabout way, " Pimples " was paying him a great compliment by discussing these difficulties with him. But Jimmy had told him that from the summit of Hangman's Hill one could hear the rumble of the guns in France. To hear this old man talk you would think the war was at the other end of the earth. Barford had become a great factory of combatants ; each term so many boys exchanged their Barford blazers or football jerseys for khaki tunics ; each term all the others were trained and drilled, and told how much more bravely the British fought than the Germans, and how much lighter their casualties were ; the school magazine gave, in each issue, a longer list of killed and wounded. And this stupid old man fussed about his beastly little problems of Eton jackets and cigarette smoking ! " Pimples " had, rather unexpectedly, produced whisky-and-soda, and Stanhope asked bluntly if he might have another drop. This business of coming back to Barford had been a

complete failure. The other members of the Old Boys team were " crocks " on light duty, or fellows who had mysterious jobs in England which made them—so they declared—indispensable. Jimmy Raleigh had made much the biggest score of the day, thus enabling the " Present " easily to beat the " Past," and his friend's success, fitness, and enthusiasm made Stanhope a little envious and unhappy. There was no real point of contact between those who wanted to see war and those who had seen it. And the more " Pimples " looked distressed at the way in which he helped himself to whisky, the more Stanhope drank. He would somehow compel the old fool to realise that the war had made a difference. He could almost see the old boy's brain working : he had always liked Stanhope as being a keen and efficient boy who had brought credit to his house, and he was clearly puzzled by the change in him. But, equally clearly, it never occurred to him that at any rate part of the blame was due to the war—to this holy crusade of Right against Wrong, to this campaign to bring Germany to her knees, to overthrow the Kaiser, to destroy everything German, and to starve every German child.

When Stanhope went up to the guest room, he leant for a long time out of the window. The dormitories, away to the right, were in darkness, but the moon shone on the walls, and he could see the little ledge on the second floor along which, out of sheer bravado, he had once crept from Farrer's dorm. to his own. Beyond that wing of the house was the cricket field, with the pavilion standing clear above

a light ground-mist. God ! How important it had seemed to get his First Eleven cap. Straight ahead loomed the main tower, with the high vaulted roof of the Great School where, as a new monitor, he had faced the ordeal of reciting the Latin Prayer on the first Saturday of term. It had seemed to him, waiting with the other monitors, until all the boys were in their places, that he could never be called upon for a greater display of courage. To the right was the junior footer field where the O.T.C. paraded, and he could recall his pride as he had first marched on to the parade ground with a lance-corporal's stripe on his arm. Beyond the junior field was the Avon Valley, and, beyond that again, the great shoulder of Hangman's Hill, from the summit of which, Jimmy had said, you could hear the low rumble of the guns.

Dennis Stanhope went over to the dressing table, and began to undress. He caught sight of his own reflection in the mirror.

" Don't wonder poor old ' Pimples ' looked so upset," he said to himself, as he tumbled into bed. " Do him good, the self-righteous old fool ! "

Then, since Madge looked so much like her brother whom he had seen again after such an eternity at the Front, he fell asleep and dreamed that she cried because he drank glass after glass of whisky, and would not stop to please her.

CHAPTER VIII

Raleigh lingered outside the orderly room chatting to Hawkins. He was happy enough to be going off on leave—even though the Adjutant had made it clear to him that this was his last leave before being sent overseas—and yet, as always, he was a little reluctant to leave his friends. He did not generally talk very much when he was with Hawkins, for example, but they understood each other so well that words were not always necessary, and with older people, or people who were not in the Army at all—even with Madge—no number of words could quite bring understanding. This war was something so new that it called forth a new and complex set of sentiments in those who were engaged in it.

In the first place there was the adventure. Instead of having to look forward to dreary days in an office, or "mugging up" a lot of law-books, or doing a certain amount of work at Oxford or Cambridge, they suddenly found that they had even more authority than they had had as monitors at school. They were in command of men far older than themselves, and, in the clubs of which they were made honorary members, old fogeys who would in other circumstances have treated them with immense superiority, now listened with deference when they expressed an opinion about the Kaiser, the strategy

of Sir Douglas Haig, or the situation in Russia. Then there was the comforting feeling of smartness that came from a well-cut tunic, shiny buttons, and a polished Sam Browne belt. There was the fun of knowing that khaki predisposed every girl in its wearer's favour. There were the same sort of excitement about the idea of going to the Front as there had been, for Raleigh, during the few hours before the match which was likely to decide whether he, or Bostock, was to get the last cap of the Rugger Fifteen. There were, at the same time, a desire to experience this life in France for which all this intensive training was preparing them and a deep-seated, repressed uneasiness lest they should fail to live up to the high standard of courage they had set themselves, or should be marked out for intense pain, maiming, or possibly even death. This fear of death seldom reached the surface of the conscious mind, however, since it was so obviously ridiculous to think that such young, keen, energetic fellows might be killed. But all such things were not to be expressed in words, so that Jimmy Raleigh sat on his motor-cycle, his swagger cane and British warm strapped on to the carrier, and talked to Hawkins when he might already be well on the way towards Wareham, Poole, and home.

"You're a lucky blighter," Hawkins said, "to have your people living so close. You're always buzzing off on leave. Come and have a last drink."

And, since they both realised that this was an occasion—this departure of Raleigh's on his last leave before being sent to the Front—they trudged

through the mud to the Officers' Mess, and had two mixed vermouths, which neither of them cared for particularly, amongst a band of topers who looked a little astonished to see them at the drinkers' end of the mess.

"Cheero," said Raleigh, as he climbed on his bike again.

"If you can't be good, be careful," counselled Hawkins.

When the motor was coaxed into action, Jimmy Raleigh jolted and skidded along the road through Wareham Camp, past the high, guarded railings and fences of Holton Heath, where hundreds and hundreds of workers made more and yet more explosives to blow the Germans sky-high.

He chose the longer way home, through Bournemouth, partly because it was thrilling to be in a town again after weeks at Bovington Camp, but perhaps still more because he knew that way the best, and he wanted rather to see houses, trees, roads with which he was thoroughly familiar, than to hunt out strange and unknown paths on this last trip home—he was hardly conscious that he made a choice at all, and it would never have occurred to him to analyse his motives.

The town was filled with soldiers, half of them in khaki and half of them in hospital blue. At the Westover Skating Rink, which was the elegant place to visit for tea, khaki predominated ; at the hospital where Raleigh went to see if he could give Madge a lift home on the back of his bike, almost the only khaki to be seen was worn by a fat old doctor who

had hastily been made a major in the R.A.M.C. in the hope that the rank would give him a little authority over the hospital orderlies. In point of fact, even three rows of medal ribbons and the red tabs of the Staff would hardly have persuaded the smallest drummer boy to stand to attention when he spoke to the untidy, kindly old doctor, but the discipline of the hospital was of the most rigid kind, thanks to the starched severity of the Matron. Madge had had a breakdown in France, and was only working temporarily in the hospital kitchens until the medical board would allow her to go overseas again. Thus she was in rather a special position, and, as daughter of Dr. Raleigh, who spent half his day helping at the hospital, might have been allowed some privileges. But the Matron granted no favours, even to pleasant-looking young subalterns who spoke to her with becoming deference. He could fetch his sister at six o'clock when she came off duty, she explained to Raleigh, but he could not even see her now, since she was busy in the kitchens.

So Jimmy Raleigh returned to the Skating Rink, hired some skates, and went round and round in melancholy solitude. There happened to be nobody in the place whom he knew, and every other officer was with friends. There were several people he would have liked to speak to, and especially one girl in the W.A.A.C.'s, who seemed almost to smile at him, but he lacked the necessary courage. Even when she stumbled and fell down directly in front of him, he almost passed her by, since he had a feeling that she had done it on purpose, and this feeling made him

all the more shy. But she looked up at him with such laughing frankness in her eyes that he tried to stop to help her, stumbled in his turn, and collapsed almost at her side, so that conversation became inevitable and easy. She told him she was stationed at Christchurch, and before he knew what he was doing he had forgotten all about his intention of calling for Madge, and had asked this new acquaintance if, when the time came, he could not take her back to her billet. Then he explained that he expected to go overseas in about a week, and was flattered when she said : " What a pity ! I hoped we should see lots of each other," and touched when she said : " I do hope you'll be all right."

" Let's have tea," he urged, and walked proudly behind her down the long gallery flanked with tea-tables. There was toast made from war bread and soaked with margarine, dried-up cakes made without butter or sugar, and saccharine tablets to sweeten the tea. But the food and drink tasted delightful, and Jimmy's cigarettes were wonderful—since she praised them. And when he rode back to Christchurch it did not matter that the weather was dark and gloomy and cold, for she sat on the carrier behind him and had to cling on to him lest she should fall off.

When the time came to say " good-bye " he asked her if they could meet again, and her face fell.

" It's so hard to get away," she confessed. " There's another girl, Carey, who's supposed to be going out to-morrow, and I'll see if I can't swop with her. But I can't be sure. You might have to wait in vain."

" I wouldn't mind a bit," he assured her. " I'll wait all day if you want me to."

She gave him a rendezvous in Christchurch for the next afternoon, said he was not to expect her if she did not come by four o'clock, and held out her hand. He shook it warmly, and then, with sudden boldness, bent down and kissed her on the wrist.

She snatched her hand away, and ran up the short garden path to her billet. But her annoyance —if she had been annoyed—lasted only a few seconds for, as she opened the door and stood with the hall light shining down on her, she turned, and blew a kiss at him.

It was not until he was nearly home that he suddenly realised he did not even know her name. There had been the letters " M. L." on the attaché case in which she carried her skates, and he spent much of the evening inventing names to fit the initials. He told Madge he had been to the Westover, and felt both angry and pleased when she accused him of " picking up some girl." He denied the accusation without much conviction and then gave himself away entirely by asking all sorts of questions about the W.A.A.C.'s at Christchurch. Before he went to sleep he had a long debate with himself as to whether he would dare to kiss her wrist again when they met to-morrow.

But on the next afternoon he waited in vain. They were to meet outside a bookshop, and he had read the title of every book in the window before half-past three. Between half-past three and four he told himself twenty times that he saw her coming in the

distance, and twenty times scoffed at himself for confusing her with such plain creatures as these twenty girls turned out to be when they came nearer. She had said he was not to wait after four o'clock, but it was not until half-past that he gave up the business of telling himself that he would go unless she came before he had counted up to a hundred. And all the way back to Alum Green he asked himself whether she had mistaken the time or place of meeting, whether she had not been able to come, whether she had not wanted to come, having someone more interesting than him to meet.

Dr. Raleigh was busy all day with his hospital work and his regular practice, which had been considerably enlarged by the shortage of local doctors. Madge, too, went off early in the morning, and returned only after dark. So Jimmy spent most of the day pottering about alone. Part of the time was given up to riding up and down various side roads in Christchurch, for he could not be sure where her billet had been—the roads and houses were so alike, and he had not worried when he had come with her. But he did not succeed in meeting her, and ultimately he gave it up as a bad job. For, in his slow, unimaginative sort of way he felt that he had no time to spare, that he wanted to visit all the spots he knew well in the New Forest, and to let them soak into his memory. He bumped along moorland paths on his motor-bike, and recalled the earlier "hunting" with Madge and Dennis on "push-bikes" that were now relegated in their rustiness to the potting shed at the bottom of the

garden. Although most of the flowerbeds and little patches of lawn had been given up to the cultivation of vegetables, the tennis lawn remained, but he had nobody to play with, and he soon tired of hitting a ball against the side of the house to keep his eye in. When he could thrust out of his mind the thought that if he were now in Christchurch or at the Westover Rink he might just possibly meet the girl whose initials were M. L., he was perfectly happy to be strolling around the garden or the house, or tramping over the moorland and through Wilman's Wood, the fallen leaves of its oaks turned crisp and brittle by frost. There was only one companion he would really have liked—Dennis Stanhope. It would be fun to show Hawkins, or one or two other fellows from Bovington Camp, the ins and outs of his home, and he enjoyed the short walks that could be managed with his father or with Madge. But Dennis was the only one who thought just as he did about the cottages, with their slow blue smoke, the mysterious stillness of Wilman's Wood, the bubbling clearness of the Highland stream. Words hadn't been necessary between Dennis and him in the old days, and the idea that he might come across Dennis out in France or Flanders gave him a great eagerness to be out there, despite the uncertainties of it all. With Dennis somewhere around, it would be all right.

CHAPTER IX

Mrs. Tucker stood on the worn doorstep of her post-office, and peered anxiously up and down the village street. Ever since "this dratted war," as she called it, had begun, she was constantly faced with this problem of telegrams—she who, in the old days, as postmistress at Alum Green, had had young Joe Bennett and Silas Medley to deliver the letters, Medley's boy to bicycle round with any urgent telegram, and that hoity-toity Ethel Sidney to help in the shop. And now the Sidney girl had "gone into munitions," and put powder all over her face; young Joe Bennett was somewhere in France; poor old Medley carried on as best he could as postman, with Mrs. Wade's daughter to help him; and Medley's son had just joined up. So here Mrs. Tucker stood on her own doorstep, looking anxiously up and down the street for Billy, her son, on his way back from school.

There was frost in the air—one of the last frosts of the winter, it would be—and a thin white mist softened the outlines of the cottages, the Bank House, and the row of elm-trees that flanked the low, grey stone church. It helped to obscure the road, and Mrs. Tucker searched in vain for anybody whom she could send with the telegram to Dr. Raleigh's house. How was it, she asked herself peevishly, that Billy

always took so long to get back from school? And here she was left to do all the work alone! This dratted war!

For the telegram was important. It came from Master James, and it said he was ordered overseas. Could his father, or Madge, come to Lyndhurst Road station, at 4.35, since his train would stop there on its journey to Southampton, and would thus give him a chance to say "good-bye." And that the telegram should come just when the telephone was out of order, so that she could only send it up by hand to the doctor's house! He would be so upset. Poor young Master James! Why, it only seemed a year or two ago that he had got into such trouble for falling into the village pond in his best Eton jacket, and now he was ordered overseas. Well, well, Joe Bennett had said it would all be over in a few weeks, because the Germans couldn't fight any more, and he was a sergeant now, so he ought to know—Mrs. Tucker had a great respect for authority. It was, indeed, this respect which made her hesitate for so long, before she put on her bonnet, locked up the shop, pinned a notice on the door to say she would be back in half an hour, and, overwhelmed by the importance of her mission and the sense that she was breaking all the post-office rules, set out along the road to deliver the telegram at Dr. Raleigh's house.

Emma, the cook-general, explained that the doctor was out on his rounds, and that Miss Madge was on her V.A.D. work in Bournemouth.

"Washing dishes and such like 'tis they gives 'er

to do," she explained indignantly to Mrs. Tucker, as to everybody else who would listen to her. " A downright shame, I calls it. 'Ow's it 'elp them to win the war? That's what I want to know. And why don't they wash their own dishes? Miss Madge, indeed! Why, look at my own 'ands." And she held out two red hands, chapped and wrinkled with rough work and washing up.

With a due sense of her own importance, Mrs. Tucker explained the contents of the telegram. But her success did not last, for Emma was masterful and commanding, which she was not.

" Now I wonder where the doctor will be," mused Emma. " Up to old Mrs. Farwell's, I daresay. We must telephone and ask."

Mrs. Tucker pointed out that the telephone was out of order.

" And just when young Master James is going off to foreign parts!" said Emma reproachfully, as though Mrs. Tucker had herself cut the wire with the one pair of garden shears she had in the ironmongery department of her shop, " Well, what shall us do about it?"

Before they had decided how to find the doctor or his daughter, the former himself returned in his shabby Standard car. His face was disappointingly passive while he read the telegram, for he had been expecting it from day to day, and hour to hour.

" Do either of you know the exact time now?" he asked.

Here Mrs. Tucker was able to shine, for she pulled at the long silver chain of which she was so proud,

and produced a nickelled watch from some secret hiding place inside her blouse, but, apparently, outside her corset.

"Twenty-two minutes past four, sir," she announced with an official note in her voice. "That's Greenwich time, sir. Told me by Bournemouth this very morning."

Dr. Raleigh did a rapid calculation in his head. He had meant to do a little work in his dispensary before setting out for the hospital in Bournemouth. But none of the medicine was really urgent. In most cases some patent preparation would do just as well, and in others his patients would forgive him when he explained in the morning. After all, he told himself, Jimmy was his only son, and Madge could not be at Lyndhurst Road to see him go. Every patient would be sorry if the son, whom they all liked so, could not say "good-bye" to the father, who was their doctor. If the car went well he might just manage it.

But the car did not go well. Its engine kept missing all the way up the long hill across the moor by Farthing Dyke. It was this beastly petrol they sold you nowadays, and the car had received such rough treatment these last few years. Jimmy himself had not done it much good during his leave—careering over to Bournemouth or Southampton at all hours of the day or night.

When Dr. Raleigh reached the station the solitary porter told him the train had just left. Even its smoke was still visible, hanging in the quiet afternoon air. He stared at it in silence, until it could no longer

be distinguished from the surrounding white mist. Then he went out of the little station and stood irresolutely by the side of the car. If he were to drive to Southampton he would certainly get there before the transport left for France. But perhaps Jimmy would be embarrassed if he were to turn up at the last moment like that. Besides, there would be sentries and restrictions of one sort and another to deal with, and Dr. Raleigh was not of those men whose very indifference to authority causes it to yield to their favour. He would give it up and go home again—but for the first time his study, which had so often been a sanctuary, held out no attraction. When he was tired or lonely or depressed he had found comfort in the neat rows of books, the bound volumes of the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet*, and the homely disorder of papers in his roll-top desk. But this was a new form of loneliness and depression, this feeling caused by the departure of Jimmy, and the companionship of books and furniture he knew well enough to love would not palliate it. Besides, he remembered with something of a shock, he had his work to do. He would be late for his appointment, and, above all, he hated unpunctuality. So he started the car, and drove off thoughtfully to Bournemouth, with its hospital of wounded and shell-shocked patients.

Suppose Jimmy were to come back smashed up—smashed up like the man he had to operate on this afternoon. Or nervy, like the corporal who could not be in a room where the drawers or cupboards were shut, and who had tried to kill himself with a fork

when the nurse had gone out of the ward. They were all so young, and so grateful, though God knew what they had to be grateful about.

Here, at the cross-roads, he had often sat of an evening with Jimmy, on their way back from some long tramp in the forest. It was the highest point for miles round, and on a clear day you could see the white cliffs of the Isle of Wight away to the south, while to the west and north were miles of heathland with strips of pinewoods crossing it here and there. To the east was the dark, dense Wilman's Wood, where Jimmy and Dennis Stanhope had built their log cabin when they were supposed to be Red Indians. A little further on, on the right, young, delicate firs had begun to hide the burnt black patch where the two boys, having failed to stamp out their camp fire properly, had set the whole place ablaze. How frightened they'd been when he had turned them out during the night and shown them the sky all red as a result of their carelessness, and had threatened to tell the police about them ! And how they'd thrilled to the adventure of helping to beat out the fire the next morning ! Adventure—that was what they had wanted. And now they were both mixed up in the greatest adventure mankind had ever known. And nobody could tell where it was going to end. Something was going wrong with Stanhope—you could see that by Madge's behaviour after she had read each of his few letters. The boy wasn't treating her fair, and Madge wouldn't talk. Perhaps if her mother were alive she might have done. But now, when she read one of Stanhope's

letters, you could see she was puzzled and unsatisfied, although she wouldn't say what was wrong. And how was the adventure going to end for Jimmy? Not, please God, as it had ended for some of these maimed fellows in hospital.

Dr. Raleigh left his car some way down the drive, and walked up the rhododendron avenue to the big red-brick house that some wealthy Jew, without any desire for self-advertisement but in a fit of genuine generosity, had turned into a hospital.

"Could I speak to my daughter?" he asked the Sister before she took him to the operating theatre. "I know I oughtn't to disturb her when she's on duty, but it's rather important."

Madge came up from the kitchens still wiping her hands on her apron. How young and healthy and strong she looked! Her face was bronzed, and her blue eyes were as clear and frank as those of a sailor. She had masses of very wavy hair that would not stay under her cap. Only by the two little puzzled lines between her eyebrows could her father tell that she felt anything of the war. It was in her nature to do her job quietly, thoroughly and without question. Perhaps it was fortunate that she took life so much as it came.

In the little morning-room where visitors had to wait to see the patients he told her that Jimmy had gone off to the Front, and the silence with which she took it made him feel awkward and embarrassed. One never knew how a girl's mind worked. Madge was so frank and so straightforward, and yet, as he now realised, he did not really know what she

thought about anything, except dogs and games, and, perhaps, scenery and rather elementary music. If only Jessie were still alive. . . .

" What bad luck on poor old J.," Madge said at length. " Going off like that ! Still, I bet he's glad to go. He ought to do jolly well out there."

Then, after another pause, she got up from the table with its ugly, red-plush cloth.

" I suppose I'd better get back to work. I'll be ready any time after six. After all, even if the bus is getting old, it's always better than the train. Cheero ! See you later."

But as she was about to pass her father, she suddenly slipped her arms round him, and stood there for a time, with her face tucked into the hollow of his shoulder.

" Oh, dear," she muttered, more to herself than to him, " I suppose it's all right."

And, back in her scullery again, she said, with a vehemence which so startled Mary Pollard that she dropped a plate, " Damn this war ! "

CHAPTER X

By leaning well out of the window Jimmy could see a solitary figure waiting on the distant platform. His first feeling of pleasure turned suddenly to pity for his father, waiting there alone. He almost regretted sending the wire, for he had hoped Madge would have been able to come too. It would be rather difficult to say " good-bye " to his father on that bare little platform—not knowing how long the train would give them—strange people gazing out at them from carriage windows. It would have been easier if Madge had been there too.

The engine shut off steam and ran out of the trees into the clearing round the station. The brakes began to hold, the solitary figure grew larger, and Jimmy's anxiety changed to a pang of disappointment. It was not his father standing there ; it was a strange, fat man, with a bowler hat and a red face. There was no one else upon the platform until a solitary porter emerged from a door that flew back and shut with a hollow clang. As the train came to a standstill Jimmy searched for the old car in the station yard. But the yard was empty : his father had not come.

The guard assisted the porter to remove a crate of fluttering chickens from the luggage van ; the two stood talking for a while. The precious moments went by. A car drew up at the closed crossing, but it

was a big Daimler, with a chauffeur and two old men inside and a disgusting, billowing bag of gas on the roof to replace petrol. Jimmy longed for the train to go. He had never waited like this in Lyndhurst Road station, although often he had clambered in and out of trains on the way to or from school, with a medley of small parcels and bags. The trees were very dark and still under the low, grey clouds.

At last the guard pulled out his watch, consulted it, and blew his whistle. The train crept away through the crossing gates.

Jimmy scarcely dared look down the straight road to Lyndhurst. It would have been rather awful to see the old car panting up with his father, and perhaps Madge, inside, just as the train passed by. He was intensely relieved to see no signs of it. He sat back in his corner of the carriage and watched the forest slipping by on either side. In a vague way he was glad of this disappointment. It was right that war should bring hardship, that it should ignore such trivial affairs as a planned meeting between a father and a son.

Now at last he was on his way to the war. He had pictured this day of gong ever since, in his last term at school, he had begun to realise that, after all, the war was going to wait for him. From then onwards—at odd times—maybe in a dull Latin hour, or before he fell asleep in his dormitory, or as he lay full length on the cricket-field after the fall of a wicket—there had come to him the day of his going to the war. He saw himself marching at the head of a column of men, smiling at people who waved handkerchiefs

from the pavement, in a crowded train of cheering soldiers, on a ship plunging through the dark, or passing lines of tents in a starlit base camp.

It had been different, as everything else so far had been different from his daydreams. A slip of paper in the letter-rack one morning had told him to report to the Adjutant, who, during a pause in a long telephone talk about supplies, had glanced up and said: "Oh, Raleigh, you take the 4 o'clock train for embarkation at Southampton to-morrow. Don't forget to settle your mess-bill; we've had a lot of bother with officers going off without squaring up—just damn carelessness, that's all. Righto"—and with a friendly nod he had returned to the telephone. Raleigh had taken a stroll with Hawkins that night, and they had sympathised with each other at not going out together. After dinner in the mess he had been entangled in a game of bridge, but he could not concentrate. He stood port to the others, and they returned the compliment. A sense of well-being from the wine mingled with the excitement of the next day, and gave a queer, almost sad feeling of romance to the cool night as he crossed the drill square to his hut.

Jimmy's thoughts were rudely broken as the train crept into Southampton. A number of officers from other regiments got out of the train, and there were one or two senior officers of his own regiment whom he did not know very well. There was a hurly-burly of busy men in blue jerseys who carted the valises on board. Soldiers and officers were filing up the gangway. The ship's bell clanged, and the propellers began to throb; ropes were cast off, and the ship

glided between the mud-banks towards the open sea.

Dusk had begun to fall ; there was a splash of red sunset in the westerly sky, over Lyndhurst way ; easterly the grey night clouds were rising behind the gulls that floated lazily in front of the ship. Jimmy leant against the rails, watching the dark water cleave away from the bows, washing back again in a wall of angry foam ; sometimes he glanced at the green meadows that rose inland from the shore, growing fainter in the distance and the dusk.

Two little destroyers fell in beside the troopship. An old grey-haired man came round saying : " Put your cork jackets on, gents, *if* you please."

Dawn was breaking as the calm passage drew to its close. Jimmy had slept fitfully in the stuffy little cabin which he shared with a bull-necked Scots subaltern. He rose and went on deck to see the coast of France. Tired though he felt, he was fascinated by the grey misty land ahead, wrapped in the twilight. A few vague shapes of buildings stood darkly against the horizon. Here—within sight, almost within touch—was the land of France. Somewhere, not far beyond the horizon, were the trenches. He strained his ear for the sound of guns, but nothing broke the silence beyond the low throb of engines and the hiss of spray.

A picture came to him which he had often painted in his mind's eye—a small hut standing somewhere in a broken wood ; dusk ; the wind moaning ; the door flying open and Dennis coming in, muffled to his ears in a trench coat, slamming the door. Men sitting round a table in candlelight, having supper ;

a stove with a red-hot lid and a pipe through the roof; tobacco smoke dimming the walls; songs, laughter, a rolling-up in blankets on creaky beds; the blowing out of the candles; darkness, quiet, and the rumble of guns.

"We shan't be landing yet awhile, sir." A dour, grizzled sailor was standing beside him, coiling a rope; the remark sounded suspiciously like a request to Jimmy to make himself scarce.

"Oh, right. Thanks," murmured Jimmy, and he went back to his cabin, where he tried to read by a light which was too dim to arouse his hearty companion.

Some sixteen hours later a tired and very bewildered young subaltern crept into his sleeping sack in a tent which was one of hundreds in the great base camp, tried feebly to sort out the jumbled experiences of the day, gave it up, and fell asleep.

It was not until after dinner on the following day that a few hours of freedom stretched ahead. The time had come, Jimmy decided, to play the trump card that might mean so much to him. Uncle Vincent was at Le Havre, and his duty was to detail officers to regiments. It was five years since Jimmy had seen Uncle Vincent, when he had come to spend a few summer days at Alum Green. Jimmy vaguely remembered a somewhat shrivelled person in crumpled tweeds, who made an effort to be funny during a game of croquet, and was only funny because the effort failed so dismally. But Uncle Vincent in tweeds with a croquet mallet at Alum Green was a different person from Uncle Vincent in general's

uniform at the base camp of Le Havre. Jimmy knew enough of the Army to realise this. His father had often talked about him during Jimmy's last leave, and had suggested that Jimmy should go to him and ask to be posted to Dennis's regiment.

"I couldn't do that," Jimmy objected—"influence."

"Why not? It wouldn't hurt anyone else."

But while Jimmy had always dropped the subject as an altogether undesirable way of pulling strings, he had long resolved that if he passed through Le Havre he would move heaven and earth to see his uncle and implore him to post him to Dennis's regiment.

And now the time had come—fate had brought him to Le Havre. He glanced round the crowded mess, with its glaring electric lights and its tightly drawn curtains, and rose from the precarious wicker chair he had secured after dinner. An orderly passed across the passage as he pulled on his coat and hat.

"Can you tell me," enquired Jimmy, "where I can find General Raleigh?"

"General Raleigh, sir?"

The corporal went away and came back charged with information. Jimmy was told to turn to the right, go to the end of the road, and take a duckboard walk to the left. General Raleigh's office was then the third hut on the right.

A steady, pitiless rain was falling softly in the windless night. Endless black huts in dead straight lines stretched away between the dark sandy roads as far as the eye could see. Dim figures moved here and there with hurricane lanterns. Jimmy hesitated a

little way down the road. After all, was it worth it? To tackle his uncle at this time of night would quite probably lead to a hearty choking-off. His tent was nearby, and there was something very alluring about crawling into a sleeping sack and blowing out the candle. It was very late. Jimmy thought of his uncle, comfortably playing bridge—if bridge existed in this bleak hutment town—it would irritate him to be disturbed. Then came the thought of the strange uncertainties ahead—a long, dark battle-line with one man in it who knew and understood him. He decided to go on.

The friendly mess-orderly's instructions had been clear enough, but in the dark, in the rain, there seemed no end to this straight road between the huts. A solitary soldier came by, muffled in a greatcoat.

"Can you tell me the way to General Raleigh's hut?"

"General Raleigh?"—rain was dripping off the peak of the soldier's hat. "Wou'd 'e be the Commandant, sir?"

"Well—he details officers to regiments." Was his uncle Commandant?

"Oh," the soldier thought. "The Commandant's 'ut's that way, sir—the way you've come."

"I was told it was this way."

"Well then, General Raleigh can't be the Commandant, sir."

Raleigh thanked the soldier, who went his way. It was silly to have asked at all, when he had been so clearly told to reach the end of the road. He plodded on.

The end came abruptly at last, against a wire fence. Taking the left track down a slippery duckboard, he came to the third corner on the left. There was a hut just like the rest. Surely his uncle would have a bigger hut?

He tapped on the door. Hobnailed boots scraped across the floor inside. The door opened. A corporal with pince-nez looked out.

"Yes?" The corporal was abrupt, almost snappy.

"Is General Raleigh here?"

The corporal eyed the boy curiously. "He is here—sir" (the "sir" a trifle reluctantly), "but it's long past hours. What was it you wanted?"

"I thought this was where General Raleigh lived."

"This is his office."

"Oh."

Here was an unexpected development. He had hoped to trace his uncle to some comfortable quarters, contentedly reading after dinner, with a cigar, possibly slippers, and a glass of port. Apparently Uncle Vincent had been working late—an overwhelming picture rose before him of facing his uncle across a bleak orderly-room table—a tired, undined, irritable uncle.

"It's no good me telling him, sir—he can't see anybody now." The corporal began to close the door as politely as he could in the face of an officer. It was now or never.

"He's my uncle," ventured Jimmy. "Will you tell him that it's his nephew wants to see him for just a moment?"

The words were out before he could restrain them, and now he stood blushing to the roots of his hair at the foolishness of pouring out family details to a strange corporal with pince-nez. But the words had a visible effect—the corporal re-opened the door, looked curiously at Jimmy, and spoke with deference.

"Well, I'll tell 'im, sir—but I don't know——" His words trailed away as he disappeared through a door in the farther end of the hut.

He appeared again after a moment and beckoned Jimmy forward as if fearful of being observed. With an odd sinking in the stomach Jimmy passed through the door into the presence of the once insignificant, croquet-playing Uncle Vincent.

His uncle was shorter than his father—thinner and older. He was standing in front of a stove. He relieved Jimmy of the well-nigh impossible task of starting the conversation by beginning it himself.

"Well," he said, "time flies."

"Yes, sir," agreed Jimmy, and then groped on. "I hope you don't mind me doing this, sir?"

"That's all right," put in the General. He relighted his pipe, and added the match to the burnt pile in the lid of a cigarette tin. "Father well?"

"Yes, quite, sir."

"When did you get here?"

"Yesterday morning, sir."

"Good crossing?"

"Quite, sir."

"I ought to have gone home to-day. Due for leave this past month. All leave cancelled, you know."

"Oh, sir?" Leave at the moment hardly concerned Raleigh. "Er—what I came about was—I wonder if you'd mind me asking, sir—I know it's—it's not——"

"Choke it up."

"Well, sir, a great friend of mine's out here. I wondered if it would be possible for me to be posted to his battalion."

"Who is it? Anybody I know?"

"I don't think you've met him. Oh, yes, you have——" It suddenly came to Raleigh. "Quite a long time ago in the summer holidays when you came to see us after you got back from India. A fellow called Stanhope. Do you remember, sir?"

"I don't think I do."

The General was losing interest. Raleigh feverishly sought to revive it.

"Do you remember, sir, one day we went fishing near Brockenhurst. You got a big trout." Jimmy remembered it for its smallness, but felt no harm could be done by enlarging it over such a space of time.

The General's pale grey eyes were roving over the buff and pink forms on his desk. He half turned his head.

"Oh, that boy. Where d'you say he is?"

Jimmy told him, as clearly and slowly as possible—the division—brigade—battalion—even the company.

"Really! What, that boy commanding a company? Time flies! So you want to be posted to his battalion?"

"If anything can possibly be done, sir."

"Well, favouritism's a bad thing, you know."

"I know, sir. But—I thought perhaps—nobody else would suffer if I was posted——" He stopped.

"I'm afraid I must treat everyone exactly alike. I can't make exceptions, just because you happen to be a nephew—you see what I mean?"

"Quite, sir."

The General held out his hand and smiled. "Well, good night. I expect you're sleepy."

"Yes, sir."

"Did those crocuses come to anything?"

"No, sir, not much."

"I told your father he set 'em too deep. Well, good night. Had some supper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right." He nodded and smiled to Raleigh as he relit his pipe.

It was on the following afternoon that a note arrived for Raleigh. It said that he was to proceed by the 8 o'clock train next morning from "B" siding to join his battalion—the battalion he had so carefully told his uncle of the previous night. Dennis's battalion. He read the roughly printed form with its scrawled, inked-in particulars again and again. A sudden desire came to go to Uncle Vincent's office and kiss the old fellow. He kicked himself for being ridiculous, and went into the mess for tea.

CHAPTER XI

Osborne glanced at his watch, gave a little sigh, and took a last look at the garden of his billet. Although it was not yet the end of March, there was a spring-like feeling in the air that came in through the open window, and the old man who owned the cottage drove his spade easily into the damp earth. Osborne envied the old Frenchman, despite his bent back and gnarled hands and arms. His face was the colour of sun-baked soil. For him the war, rumbling away day and night to the east, was no more to be feared than summer thunder. Occasionally a bomb had dropped in a neighbouring field, and one of his cows had been killed by a clumsy recruit from England during bombing practice. But the thunder that muttered and growled on summer evenings might at any time lead to a storm which would flatten out his corn or destroy his hay, while the most direct effect of the war was the constant stream of British soldiers with their odd ways and their welcome readiness to buy fruit, milk, wine or beer at prices which made the old man shake his head with awe.

Osborne, watching him at his steady, patient work, thought longingly of his own garden at home. Already the bulbs would be coming up, and the lilac bush near the gate to the playing-fields would be in bud. The little devils would still scramble up the wall to tear down twigs and branches. He was a

man of even temper—exceptionally so, even for a schoolmaster—but this blind, stupid destruction of growing things had always made him angry. And yet, as long as Broomhill School existed—it might not be very long, since Templeton, who had taken the place over, was not doing very well, and in any case the future of private schools had become so uncertain during the war—but as long as Broomhill existed, little scamps would climb on each other's shoulders to tear down the lilac that hung over the playground wall.

Sometimes, early in the morning before the thin bird-like chatter began from the dormitories, Osborne, crossing the playground on his way back from the boys' swimming pool, had stopped to look at that little tree, with its rich purple blossom drooping down against the white wall of the playground. It was one of those pictures which, for no explicable reason, remained always clear and fresh in his memory. The destruction of beauty struck him as more lamentable now than it had done before August 1914 ; but he no longer had it in him to grow angry with thoughtless, small boys who broke off twigs of scented lilac—how could one reproach them in face of this immense and organised destruction of war ? Indeed, as he thought of the youngsters who had been placed at one time or another under his control at Broomhill, a faint smile lifted the corners of Osborne's mouth. To be headmaster of a smallish private school had not been his ambition when he had come down from Oxford, but the existence of a delicate, widowed mother and an unmarried sister

had made him hesitate before those risks which might have made of him a figure in the world, but which might, equally, have prevented him from contributing so large a share to the expenses of his mother's small household. Then had come his own marriage to counsel prudence. But the school had been good fun, and very well worth while.

In the garden the old French peasant continued his steady digging. A thrush hopped about boldly almost at his feet, convinced that all this earth was being turned up solely for its own benefit. With another little sigh, Osborne strapped up his pack and went out into the village street.

In the next billet, a half-ruined *estaminet* which, despite its discomfort, was the most sought-after billet for miles around because Angèle lived there, Hibbert, Trotter, the Medical Officer, and two subalterns over from a neighbouring battalion, sat playing *vingt-et-un*. Three empty bottles of sweet champagne stood on a chair near the table. Nobody liked the stuff, but it had become almost a tradition to drink " bubbly " before they went up the line to the trenches again. The room was bare, and not very clean, for Angèle and her mother knew that the billet was popular, whatever the quantity of dirt in it, and they spent much time, that might have been devoted to sweeping or scouring, at the knitting-machine they had bought just before the war. Angèle's mother was a timid little woman, who might have been expected to flee westwards when the first shell had landed in the village : even the destruction of the kitchen by a 4.5 had not driven her away from

the knitting-machine, for the purchase of which she had scraped and saved so long. So she knitted away feverishly, and worried little about Angèle and her failure to keep the place clean. Besides, the big room was used as the Company Officers' Mess, and she could always blame the batmen if there were complaints.

A few fly-blown advertisements of byrrh, vermouth and beer hung round the walls. One of them had been turned face to the wall, and the back of the cheap frame was used for company orders. Hibbert, supported half-heartedly by Trotter, had stuck drawings from *La Vie Parisienne* over others. On the table in the corner was an untidy pile of kit—trench coats, puttees, mufflers, and cardigan jackets. The stove in the middle of the room was red-hot on top, and a couple of pairs of boots steamed in front of it. There was, as the Medical Officer put it, " a hell of a fug," and he made it worse by puffing away steadily at a peculiarly foul pipe.

Trotter's red, round face shone with excitement, for his luck was in, and he had quite a pile of matches, each representing a franc, in front of him. Later, when the matches were converted into money, he would feel slightly guilty, for, much as he liked winning money, he was reluctant to take it from his friends. Besides, as the only officer in the company who had risen from the ranks, he had a slight sense of inferiority which made it awkward for him to beat men who instinctively put their aitches in their right places. But for the moment he felt only triumph, and he drank his champagne with the boastful and greedy gesture of a profiteer.

" Done you again, 'Ibbert," he said, as he swept another little pile of matches across the table towards him.

Hibbert was a bad loser. There were two hectic patches of red on his usually pale cheeks, and he nervously twisted his small yellow moustache.

" Never saw such bloody luck," he growled, as though he believed that in some way Trotter was not playing fairly. " I've had enough of this."

For well over an hour the excitement of gambling had made him forget that they were going into the line again. Now even gambling had let him down, and he pushed back his chair angrily. He paid up his debts grudgingly, and went into the next room.

As luck would have it, Angèle was alone at the knitting machine. She did not hear him come in, so he tiptoed up to her and stood behind her. The pale March sun shone on her neck, and the imminence of his departure for the trenches gave him a desperate courage. Hitherto he had dared do no more than brush his hand, as it were accidentally, against hers, when he passed her in the passage. Now he bent down, slipped his arm round her waist, and kissed her just behind her ear.

Angèle wrenched herself out of his grasp and was on her feet in a second.

" *Espèce d'insolent !* " she panted. " How dare you ? "

Then she softened a little, for there was something rather appealingly weak about Hibbert.

" You had no right to do that, and if you try again, I shall tell the Captain."

"But, mademoiselle, we shall be off in half-an-hour to the trenches. You might be nice to me a bit."

The appeal, dictated by his own fears of the future, was not without its effect on Angèle. She had seen so many ambulances driven past the *estaminet* in the last three and a half years. It seemed to her that she could hardly remember the time when the guns were not growling away in the east, when the night sky was not lit up by the trench flares, when wounded men were not brought down the road on their way to hospital. She had had so much longer experience of war than this pale-faced young officer in front of her.

"All right," she said; "we'll forget about it. But you mustn't begin again."

And she held out her hand.

Hibbert stood motionless for a moment while a struggle proceeded inside him. He wanted to shake hands with her in a friendly way; she had been frank and decent, and it would be nice to leave her with the feeling that he had "played the game." But her bare arms were so damnably attractive and the lines of her body so provokingly alluring. Before she could guess his intentions he had his arms round her and was kissing her violently.

"*Ah! Zut, alors! ca ç'est trop fort!*"

Angèle struggled until she had one hand free, and then she gave him a resounding slap on the face. At the same moment Trotter opened the door. He stood there, chuckling with laughter at Hibbert's confusion.

" Sorry," he spluttered. " I didn't know you two were 'aving parlour games."

" Blast you, Trotter," said Hibbert. " Damn and blast you ! "

" 'Ere, steady on, young man. Don't you try blasting me. I didn't slap your face, but I don't mind kicking your be'ind if mamzelle wants me to." Then his ill-humour disappeared, as it always did within a second or two, and he continued in a normal tone : " Time to parade. Better get your kit on. Just came in to tell yer." He turned to Angèle. " Good-bye, mamzelle," he said. " See you again soon. Don't let nobody else get 'old of that bed of mine. Bring you back a Boche 'elmet if you don't. Au revoir ! "

Angèle, still flushed and angry, shook hands with Trotter, who left the room struggling to do up his tunic buttons over his large stomach. Hibbert slunk sullenly towards the door.

" Good-bye, mademoiselle," he muttered.

" Good-bye, Monsieur l'Officier," she replied in a cold, flat voice.

She stood for a long time in front of her knitting-machine, and looked out of the window to where the men, laden with packs, ammunition, stores, spades, firewood and sacks of bread, were lining up in the village street. Many of them she knew by sight, for the battalion had come back a dozen times to rest in her village. One or two of them, seeing her standing near the window, waved their hands to her, and called out cheery remarks which she would not have understood even had the closed windows not

deadened the sound of their voices. And Captain Stanhope, hurrying down the road, saluted her, and allowed a smile to flicker over his face and soften the deep lines that ran down on each side of his mouth.

She nodded back brightly, for he was her particular favourite. Even when he had drunk deeply he never tried to flirt with her, as did most officers who visited the billet ; there was something a little appealing, almost tragic, about his appearance, for he was still much too young to have those deep lines in his face ; he was so liked by his men that he came nearer to her conception of a hero than anybody else, except Jules Denain, who might have become engaged to her had he not been swept away to serve in the French Army in Lorraine. Besides, the Englishman had been out so long—so long indeed that the odds against his return seemed to be heavier each time he went to the trenches.

" *Le malheureux*," muttered Angèle to herself, and she went back without enthusiasm to her knitting-machine.

As for Stanhope, the smile died out of his face as soon as he had passed the window, and it gave way to a certain sternness which made each platoon commander hope that no man had forgotten to shave or had got his rifle dirty. There had been the letter to Madge to explain why he had not come home on leave, and he hated lying above everything else. Yet how could he possibly have told Madge that he had taken his leave in Paris because he had not dared to face her, whom he loved, and his father,

whom he respected? He had put off writing so long that she, who so hated to show her own feelings, had sent him little reproaches, flavoured with anxiety: "I know you must be fearfully busy, but it is rotten hearing from you so seldom"; or "Your leave seems long overdue. It's like you not to worry about yourself, but you'll do even better if you get away some time. Your father, in his letters, sounds very worried"; or "Despite the hospital, I'm keeping the tennis lawn weeded and rolled. I'm getting pretty soft, but I'll still give you a good game"; or "It's a bit lonely, and it will be ripping when you get back for a few days. Official postcards aren't much of a consolation."

So he had lied, and had explained how it had only been possible to get two days' leave, which he had spent in Paris with the Duquesnes, who had taken him as a paying guest one summer holiday at Étretat. And lest his excuse should sound unconvincing, he had given a most detailed account of all he was supposed to have done in the French capital, of the shows he had seen (the names of which he had got out of a newspaper in his billet), and of the people he had met. But it was all a lie. Having refused leave as long as he could, since he did not know how to spend it, he went to Paris, picked up with a gang of *embusqués*, who were busy collecting medals and decorations in the Café de la Paix, and drank until he could forget how he was wasting precious hours that might have been spent with Madge on the tennis lawn, or strolling through the woods along the bank of that stream that ran near

the Raleigh's house. He could not tell her of the drunken evenings, and of the mornings, when misery filtered into his brain as the daylight filtered into his dingy hotel bedroom.

So he rode, a morose figure, at the head of his company, towards the firing line.

PART II

CHAPTER XII

Stanhope stood in the alcove made by a small dugout, the roof of which had been destroyed by a shell, and watched the men as they filed in from the communication trench.

"Number One platoon to the right; Numbers Two, Three, and Four to the left," the sergeant-major ordered from time to time, and the file of tired men went right or left as though they were taking part in some ludicrous folk-dance. It had been muddy on the way up, and many of them had slipped and slithered until they were plastered with caked earth that cracked as they walked. Private Donovan, of course, was one of them, and, as the sergeant-major pointed out to him with a peculiar and enviable bluntness of language, he had managed, as he always did, to get the muzzle of his rifle choked with mud—an offence which, in the eyes of authority, was very nearly a crime.

The men, laden with packs, equipment, rifles, bundles of firewood, greatcoats, boxes of ammunition, sheets of corrugated iron, and piles of new sandbags, pushed their way along the narrow trench, past the company they had to relieve. This company was impatient, but cheerful, since it had every prospect of four days' "rest"—four days of

parades, rifle and kit inspections, and route marches, but relieved and made glorious by ample leisure for sleeping and loafing around in idleness. "C" Company, on the other hand, was in a bad temper, for the communication trench had been kept in bad repair, and the whole place was dirty and untidy.

"I'll bet it's Hardy's company," Stanhope grumbled to himself.

And, sure enough, down in the dugout, Osborne was "taking over" from a red-faced, cheerful-looking captain who, as he gossiped, held a large sock to dry over a candle-flame. He was a slap-dash sort of man who had never believed in neatness and tidiness at home, and could not agree with commanding officers out in France who looked upon these qualities as all-important. He argued, and with a certain amount of reason, that his men would fight if and when they got a chance, and that nothing else mattered.

So while Osborne tried to "take over" in the approved style, Hardy offered him whisky, whistled a new tune he had picked up on leave, and continued to dry his sock with an intentness which seemed to indicate a belief that even the war was an affair of only secondary importance.

"You'll excuse my sock, won't you?" he asked, remembering his manners.

"Certainly, It's a nice-looking sock."

"It is rather, isn't it? One of Sister Susie's—guaranteed to keep the feet dry. Trouble is that it gets so wet doing it."

" Stanhope asked me to come and take over. He's looking after the men coming in."

" Splendid ! " declared Hardy, with an emphasis which Osborne might take either as a compliment or as an expression of Hardy's relief that Stanhope, with all his fussy ways and strict ideas of discipline was not the man with whom he had to deal. Knowing his Hardy—for he had often ridden with him to Poperinghe, or over Mont Noir to Bailleul, for tea in the days when the Brigade had been in Ypres Salient—Osborne felt that no compliment was involved.

" You know, I'm awfully glad you've come," the other went on.

To which Osborne, again knowing his Hardy, expressed some surprise. " Why, I thought it was such a quiet bit of line up here ? "

Hardy became so serious that he put his sock down on the table and leant forward.

" Well, yes. So it is—in a *way*. But you never know. Sometimes nothing happens for hours on end. Then, all of a sudden, ' over she comes ' ! Rifle-grenades, ' minnies,' and those horrid little things that look like pineapples—but aren't. Swish—swish—swish—swish—BANG ! "

" All right ! " protested Osborne. " All right ! I know. What about this handing over ? "

Hardy went on, paying no attention to the other's question, " You know the big German attack's expected any day now ? "

" It's been expected for the last month."

" Yes, but it's very near now. There's funny

things happening over in the Boche country. I've been listening at night when it's quiet. There's more transport than usual coming up—you can hear it rattling over the *pavé* all night. More trains in the distance, puffing up and going away again, one after another, bringing up loads and loads of men."

Osborne responded to the other's unusual solemnity. "Yes," he agreed gravely, "it's coming pretty soon now."

"Are you here for six days?" asked Hardy, pulling on his sock.

Osborne nodded.

"Then I should think you'll get it—right in the neck."

"Well, you won't be far away. Come along, let's do this handing over. Where's the map?"

Hardy groped unhopefully among the papers and odds and ends on the table. He seemed quite surprised to find a tattered map, which he spread out unevenly on a water-bottle, a tobacco-tin, and some ration biscuits. He explained, in a vague way, that the company held two hundred yards of the line, that the Germans were sixty yards away, that the larchwood marked on the map could be recognised by a few broken, splintered tree-stumps away to the left, and that a little heap of red bricks in No Man's Land was called Beauvais Farm.

"I shouldn't let the men go out for vegetables in the garden," he advised. "There's a sniper who's got a grudge against vegetarians. I've had two fellows hit that way."

"Where do the men sleep?" asked Osborne.

"*I* don't know. The sergeant-major sees to that. As for this fine, well-appointed residence, the servants and signallers sleep in there, through that hole to the left. Two officers sleep here, and three more through that hole to the right. Gravel soil, a large garden, and the most commodious living-rooms in the sector. All yours, my boy, and I'll throw in the pictures for nothing." He repented quickly of his generosity. "All except this one," he added, and carefully unpinned from one of the wooden props a picture from *La Vie Parisienne*, showing an unusually roguish-looking damsel in considerable trouble with her skirts in an unruly wind. He folded it with unwonted neatness and care, and put it in the pocket of his Field Message Book.

Osborne wandered round the dugout to take stock of it. It was good, as dugouts went, but dirtier than either he or Stanhope would like.

"Is this the best bed?" he asked, prodding the wooden frame covered with wire netting on which Hardy was sitting.

"No, that's *my* bed over there," the other said. And he went on to explain that the others in the farther dugout were not so satisfactory, since the wire netting had gone in places, and a fellow could only keep in one of them by hanging his arms and legs over the side. "Don't hang your legs too low, though," he advised, "or the rats gnaw your boots."

"Got many rats here?"

Hardy reflected for a minute. "I should say, roughly, about two million. But then, of course, I don't see them all."

A subaltern in his company came down to announce that the men were all ready to start down the line, and Hardy hurriedly pulled on his boot. " Carry on," he ordered the officer. " I'll be up in half a jiffy." Then he turned to Osborne. " Well, that's all right, isn't it ? " he asked. " I think I'll be going."

" But don't you want to see Stanhope ? "

Hardy made some excuse about having to get down with the company. Then he gave it up and grinned in his disarming way.

" I don't specially want to see him," he admitted. " He's so fussy about the trenches, and I expect they *are* rather dirty. He'll be on at me for hours if he catches me. Here's a list of trench stores if you really feel you've not done your duty of ' taking over ' properly. There's 115 rifle-grenades—I shouldn't use them if I were you ; they're pretty rusty. Then there's 500 Mills bombs, 34 gum-boots . . . "

" That's 17 pairs."

" Oh, no : 25 right leg and 9 left leg. But everything's down here. I didn't check it when I took over, but I think the sergeant-major did, so it's quite all right."

" I don't wonder you don't want to see Stanhope," commented Osborne grimly, as he accepted the tattered list of trench stores, with its stains of cocoa and candle-grease. Why *couldn't* one get angry with Hardy ? he asked himself.

" By the way, how *is* the dear boy ? " enquired Hardy when Stanhope's name was mentioned. " Drinking like a fish as usual ? "

Perhaps one *could* get angry with Hardy. What the deuce did he mean, untidy creature that he was, criticising a fellow like Stanhope?

"Why do you say that?" he asked quietly.

"Well, damn it, it's just the natural thing to say about Stanhope." He looked curiously at Osborne, and changed his tone. The slight bitterness which always gave an edge to his voice when he referred to Stanhope—who, despite his drink, was so damned capable—disappeared for a moment. "Poor old man! It must be pretty rotten for you, being his second in command, and you such a quiet, sober, old thing."

"When I want your sympathy, I'll ask for it," said the other, with unusual asperity. "He's a long way the best company commander we've got."

"Oh, he's a good chap, I know. But I never *did* see a youngster put away the whisky he does. The last time we were out resting at Valennes he came to supper with us, and drank a whole bottle in one hour fourteen minutes—we timed him."

Osborne made a gesture of disgust. What did these fellows know of Stanhope? There was that time up in the Salient, when the company had been gassed to blazes near Hill 60, and Stanhope was laid out with trench fever. The men were nervous, and grumbling because, as soon as they reached Dickebusch Huts for a rest, a new order came for them to go back to the trenches. The doctor had ordered Stanhope to go down to hospital, but when the men fell in to move off up to the line again, there was Stanhope on his horse, determined to go with them. For nearly

three years he had stuck it—from eighteen to twenty-one—and these other fellows, who came and went in the space of a few months or so, filled him with drink in order to make fun of him. Osborne turned upon Hardy angrily.

"Yes, I suppose you all thought it amusing to cheer him on, encourage him to drink more. Just because he's stuck it until his nerves have got battered to bits, he's called a drunkard! And you make a joke of it!"

"Oh, here, I say!" protested Hardy. "Don't take it like that. Don't get shirty. He's not a drunkard; just a—just a hard drinker. You can't help somehow admiring a fellow who can get through a bottle like that, and then pick out his own hat all by himself and walk home. Of course, you're biased—you have to put him to bed when he gets there."

"Don't be an ass. That's got nothing to do with it. There isn't a man to touch him as a commander of men. He'll command the battalion one day if . . ."

"Yes, if!" interrupted Hardy, with a laugh.

Osborne had recovered his normal calm. It wasn't any good arguing with a chap like Hardy. "You don't know him as I do," he said quietly. "I love that fellow. I'd go to hell with him."

"Oh, you sweet, sentimental old darling!"

"Come along. Finish handing over, and stop blithering."

Hardy remembered that his company must by now be out of the front line, and that Stanhope might be coming down to the dugout at any moment.

"There's nothing else to do," he asserted, and hitched his pack over his shoulders.

"What about the log-book?"

"God! you are a worker. Oh, well, here we are."

He discovered a tattered little book on the table beneath his gas-satchel and his map-case.

"Here we are. Written right up to date: '5 p.m. to 8 p.m. All quiet. German airman flew over the trenches. Shot a rat!'"

"Did he?"

"No, I shot the rat, you ass. Well, finish up your whisky; I want to pack my mug."

He hitched on his different belongings until he looked like a travelling pedlar. As he leant over the table to light a cigarette at the candle, he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Well, I'm damned! Still at it!"

"What is? Still at what?"

"Why, that earwig. It's been running round and round that candle ever since tea-time. Must have done a mile."

"I shouldn't hang about here if I were an earwig."

"Nor should I! I'd go home. Still, they're useful little beasts for racing. Ever tried it? You each have an earwig and start 'em up in a line, dig 'em in the ribs, and then steer the little blighters with matches across the table. I won ten francs last night. Had a *splendid* little fellow. I'll tell you the secret if you'll swear not to let it out?"

"I swear."

"Well, if you want to get the best pace out of an earwig, dip it in whisky—makes 'em go like hell!

Now I'll be off. Cheero ! And don't forget the big attack."

" Oh, Lord, no. I mustn't miss that," Osborne agreed gravely. " I'll make a note of it in my diary. Cheero ! "

While Hardy went up the dugout steps, singing a music-hall song to himself, Osborne settled down at the table and began to study the map. Stanhope ought to come down and get some food, he reflected. The men must have all moved in long ago, and he'd have enough time in the trench without pottering about there when he might have been resting for once. Still, the last thing Stanhope could stand was the feeling that he was being nursed and looked after ; the only thing to do was to wait until he turned up.

In the front line Stanhope had found a quiet corner, where he stood staring over the parapet. There was very little firing, and most of the few bullets that passed were flying high, so that they would end their career harmlessly, in the mud, unless some astonished transport man, a long way behind the line, happened to get into the way of one of them. It was odd to think of the millions of cartridges, each one so carefully fashioned from ores which people could spare so ill, brought over so many miles of railway, carried up with such sweat and toil to the front line, to end by burying themselves deep in the earth. Some day peasants, ploughing their fields again, would come across these shapeless, rusted scraps of metal, and, recognising them as rifle-bullets, would throw the useless things on the

scrap-heap, and tramp on heavily up the furrow, turning over soil enriched by blood. Corn would grow where trenches had been, would be ground into flour, kneaded into dough, and children would eat bread that had come from the corpses of their fathers. Some day these two long lines of rival armies would disappear, and only students, pouring over military manuals or history books, would remember whether such and such a village had been in Allied or German hands, such and such a cathedral had been destroyed by Allied or German shells and bombs.

There was hardly a sound to be heard, and the occasional trench flares shone on an empty, desolate strip of No Man's Land which was so churned up that it looked like a sea that had grown muddier and muddier until it had become too stiff to move. So quiet that he could hear his wrist-watch ticking, and yet one knew that thousands of guns were hidden close at hand, all ready cleaned and oiled ; millions of bullets lying in pouches ; thousands of soldiers—British, French, Belgian, German—waiting, thinking, wondering. And somewhere, miles behind the lines, generals, studying maps pinned on the walls of châteaux drawing-rooms, moved little flags here and there, and tried to outwit each other. *Communiqués* which minimised their own losses, and exaggerated their own successes, were tapped out over field telephones or carried by despatch-riders slithering across the country on their motor-bicycles, and in due course were used to keep up the nation's morale, to fill the people with an ever-greater readiness to be sacrificed, to prove that the enemy were cowardly, or

despairing, or treacherous. How could any human being bear all this burden of responsibility? How could they manage to avoid thinking, and yet, if they did think, how could they remain sane?

A timid voice interrupted the train of Stanhope's reflections.

"Beg pardon, sir," it said.

Stanhope looked round at the sergeant who stood below him in the trench.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing, sir. It's only I thought you was going to sleep up there with your 'ead on the parapet. The men does sometimes, and it ain't very 'ealthy. So I took the liberty——"

"That's all right, Sergeant. I suppose there are better pillows. Besides, I ought to get a move on, anyhow. Thanks."

And Stanhope went along the trench to fetch Trotter down to supper.

CHAPTER XIII

The train was late in starting. It was long past schedule time before a very old and fussy engine came to link itself to the coaches. Even then it took the engine time before it had regained its breath and taken the strain of its load.

From his corner Raleigh searched for hours for shellholes and ruins among the thin woods and fields of stubble grass. But he saw no mark upon this peaceful countryside. The March evening had long since turned to night before the fringe of the war zone was reached.

Peering out into the darkness, he fancied now and then that he saw buildings strangely distorted and broken, and once he caught a fleeting glimpse of a deep, black hole beside a twisting stream.

For a long time he dozed ; it must have been near midnight when he suddenly became fully awake. The train had stopped, and men were walking up and down outside with lanterns—talking and calling to each other. Cold and sleepy, Raleigh collected his kit and climbed down on to the platform with the rest of the passengers.

Here, at last, with a vengeance, was the war. No need to search and imagine any longer. Pale ruins jagged the dark sky on every side. With a little group of other newcomers, he was led down a street where

here and there round swellings rose—shell holes filled with new earth, which seemed to have swollen over unhealed wounds ; there were rows of houses like jaws of broken teeth.

He was shown into a hut of corrugated iron, and his valise was spread out by a strange soldier who passed the time of day and disappeared. He lay in the darkness awhile before he slept. Never had he known a stillness so intense as in this broken town. He was used to quietness, but at home there had always been some faint rustle in the trees, or a distant sound from the road. Only once the wind stirred, and with it seemed to come a far-away, uneasy murmur like distant thunder. There came to him another time when he had heard that sound—standing one summer evening on the crest of Hangman's Hill, with a group of awed, excited boys.

Next afternoon a rusty, discordant motor-lorry bounced along with Raleigh and two other officers who were bound for the same battalion. At twilight they ran through a valley into a straggling village of cottages and farms.

The lorry-driver pulled up, peered along the deserted street, and turned to his passengers. " Looks as if they've gone," he said.

He clambered from his seat and let the tail-board of the lorry down. " I should see the Quartermaster if I was you—transport can't 'ave left yet. That's 'is place, over there."

Jackson, who had been with the battalion before and was now returning from sick leave, took the lead,

and knocked at the Quartermaster's door with his stick.

A stout, cheerful officer appeared, beamed, and said : " Ha-hah !—we've been expecting you. You're just too late—the battalion moved off an hour ago. Still, you can go along with the transport. Come in. Just time for a cup of tea."

He led the way into a dilapidated little room where a cheerful fire was burning in a brazier, such as night-watchmen have in city streets, and soon the three hungry arrivals were washing down slabs of buttered toast with hot, sweet tea. The Quartermaster was a man who got things done : he ordered the officers' valises to be brought into an adjoining room, advised Jimmy and the other arrival who had not been out before as to what they would require, and helped them to stuff their packs with all that was necessary.

" You want your washing and shaving kit, of course—and a blanket and a ground sheet—a change of underclothes—specially socks—and some spare boots."

A sergeant arrived to report the ration limbers ready to move off. They all put on their mackintoshes, slung on their packs, and went with the Quartermaster into the street. Some mule-drawn limbers and hand-carts were standing in readiness.

" It's not a long trek, really," said the Quartermaster, as he clambered on to his horse. " Dump your packs on that limber and follow along behind."

They followed the convoy out of the valley and along a straight road between dark fields. They

passed a big roofless château, standing behind tall railings in a garden of dank, coarse grass and ragged trees. Gradually the road grew rougher, until it became no more than a cart-track over what seemed a vast, flat plain. Sometimes the track bridged deep trenches, or wound by narrow avenues through belts of rusty wire.

They halted in the shelter of a wood, and a party of men rose from the shadows to help unload the limbers. In a few minutes the whole convoy left the empty limbers and filed on foot along a twisting duckboard walk—each man with two sacks slung over his shoulder.

At first the Very lights had been a faint, luminous foam above the horizon ; now, as they drew nearer, it was possible to see each light distinctly as it rose and fell quietly in it's graceful curve. Occasionally a gun barked from its hidden lair.

They came to a road, and followed it until it sank into a cutting. Quite suddenly they turned into a narrow lane, hewn in the side of the steep bank, and Raleigh realised, with a slight thrill, that he was walking in a trench—his first real trench.

It seemed that they turned and twisted for miles in this sunken passage, with the rough earth walls beside them, and a little fringe of coarse grass encroaching over the top. Once they passed a huge, gaunt skeleton that might in the old days have been a factory, and for a little way the trench ran so close to its broken walls that the foundations were laid bare. A little farther on they passed through a jungle of undergrowth which almost met overhead, and

roots stuck out of the trench walls like skinny hands. Sometimes a machine-gun tapped out in the distance—or a rifle cracked.

After a while they came to signs of habitation. Dark holes opened from the trench walls and led by steep steps down into the earth. Candles glimmered below : from one dugout came the cheerful strains of a mouth-organ, from another the odour of frying bacon, from all a hot breath of stagnant air. Two grizzled soldiers sat at the top of one flight of steps, smoking their evening pipes, and talking quietly.

They passed the last dugout of this cheerful little settlement and moved into the solitude again. Sometimes they stopped to rest awhile, dropped their packs in the trench, and sat on them until the order came to move. Raleigh began to think no end would ever come, when suddenly they reached a deep, open space where several trenches met.

A voice came out of the night : " Corporal, take these officers to battalion headquarters."

" Yes, sir." A dark figure peered at them, and said, " Will you come along, please."

Raleigh fell in behind, and followed along a trench until the corporal halted before a sandbagged by-lane, labelled " To Batt. H.Q." The lane ended abruptly before a curtained doorway, through which the corporal disappeared.

As they waited, a soldier in shirt-sleeves emerged through the curtain with two empty soup-plates in his hands, glanced at them, and disappeared into a hole. A bullet passed like a whip-crack overheard.

In a few moments the corporal re-appeared and

ushered them through the curtain. They stood in a square, timbered place where some officers were seated at dinner.

" Good evening," said a little grey-haired man at the farther end of the table. " I hoped you'd arrive in time to have come in with us. Never mind, though." He produced a small notebook and turned the pages. " You've been with the battalion before, haven't you ? " he said to Jackson. " Before my time, though."

Jackson explained that he had been with " A " Company, and would like, if possible to return to it.

" That's all right," said the Colonel. " They want another officer. Mr. Dawes, you report to Captain Marlow of ' B ' Company—and Mr. Raleigh, report to Captain Stanhope, of ' C ' Company." The Colonel jotted the names in his book, and turned to an officer by his side : " Go and get runners to take these gentlemen to their companies."

It may have been the sudden closeness of the little dugout after the crisp night air, or the darkness and the curious quietness of it all, that gave Raleigh a sudden, odd sense of unreality. The Colonel's words came as if from a figure in a dream—" Captain Stanhope, of ' C ' Company."

CHAPTER XIV

A runner from battalion headquarters led Raleigh up a long narrow lane, paved with duckboards, or, in places, with branches from larch-trees, old sacks stuffed with empty tins, or rubble from the ruins of some neighbouring farm.

" It ain't nothing to write 'ome about, sir, this communication trench," remarked the runner, " but it's more 'ealthy-like than the open country. Jerry's decent, on the whole, in this sector, but 'is machine-gunners always 'as insomnia. Jest carn't keep quiet."

At Bovington Camp they had dug communication trenches which ran breast-deep through the heather, and of which the sandy walls were as clean-cut as though they had been hewn from rock. Their floors were kept as spick and span as the tidy front-line trenches, with their neat and regular traverses and firesteps. Out here it was difficult, even in the light of the trench flares, to see very clearly, but Raleigh was overwhelmed with the patchy untidiness of it all. Unexpected pieces of timber, bits of old stiffened webbing equipment, sandbags that were so dirty and bedraggled that they seemed not to belong to the same species as the clean sandbags they used at home—these made up the walls of the communication trench. At one place something shone from between two sandbags with a dull silvery glow.

"What's that?" he asked in as casual a voice as he could produce.

"Phosphorescent, sir. That one's only a bit of wood. I noticed it just now and looked." Then the runner added as an afterthought: "Generally it's bones. There's lots of Frenchies buried hereabouts."

Here and there other untidy trenches branched out to right or left. "Unused support trench," the runner informed him, or "C.T. to 'B' Company," or "men's latrines." It was all such a muddle, and so little like his preconceived ideas of trenches, that he felt he would never be able to find his way about. And all these Very lights gave the place an exciting fifth-of-November atmosphere. The sharp crack of bullets was very distinct now—it was almost as though they were being fired from a yard or two away—but they were somehow not at all frightening.

The communication trench suddenly ended in a cross-trench filled with men. They looked at him curiously as they made way for him to pass, and he felt almost as awkward as on his first day at school. These must be fellows from "C" Company—some of them might be soon under his own command—and he knew they were summing him up. He could not help wishing that he looked a little older.

"Where's 'C' Company 'eadquarters, Sergeant?" the runner asked. "New officer come to join 'em."

"Good evening, sir," said the sergeant. "I'll show you the way."

The runner saluted, and disappeared into the night before Raleigh had time to thank him. He followed his new guide, more conscious than ever

that the men were watching him and sizing him up.

"Here's headquarters, sir," said the sergeant, "down them steps," and he pointed to the entrance of a dugout.

"Oh . . . thanks." Raleigh paused a moment, wondering what to do.

"Better go down, sir," advised the sergeant gruffly.

"Oh, yes. Righto. Good night, Sergeant."

He felt his way carefully down the few steps that led to the dugout. The place was low and dingy, lit by three or four candles thrust into the necks of bottles, or stuck on to thin slats of wood pushed in between two sandbags. The light flickered on a tangled mass of equipment hanging from the wall, a whisky-bottle on a rough table made out of packing cases, a jumble of papers, and an officer with short, iron-grey hair, who sat on the edge of a bunk studying a map.

He looked up with interest when Raleigh appeared. "Hullo!" was his greeting.

"Good evening," said Raleigh, and then, noticing the other's grey hair, he added: "sir."

"You the new officer?"

"Er—yes. I've been to battalion headquarters. They told me to report here."

"Good! We've been expecting you. Sit down, won't you? I should take your pack off. Awkward things to sit around in."

"Oh, right. I think I will, thanks."

He struggled out of his equipment, feeling a little more at his ease. This old chap was obviously a

decent sort. What with him and Dennis Stanhope, the company ought to be good fun. And it was odd how those few steps cut him off from the war. The sound of machine-guns was no louder than the faint, insistent tapping of a finger-nail against a door, and the earthy walls of the dugout muffled the noisy explosion of shells. It would be fun to meet Dennis again, and to see his surprise ! He would have liked to ask this other officer about him, but did not dare to do so yet. Instead, he examined the dugout with care, while he sought for some non-committal, bright remark which would keep the conversation going and show how much he was already at his ease.

The dugout was quite a large one, with two gloomy tunnels leading from it to left and right. Besides the table there were two bunks, consisting of strips of wood with wire netting nailed across them, and two packing-cases which obviously served as chairs. Round the walls were pinned a series of French drawings, from *La Vie Parisienne*, of girls in flimsy costumes. They embarrassed him very much, since he felt he should make some comment on them which would show that he was a man of the world, and yet he could not think of anything appropriate to say. The other broke the silence.

" Have a drink ? " he asked, stretching a long arm out towards the whisky-bottle.

Raleigh hesitated.

" Perhaps you don't like whisky ? "

" Oh, yes, rather ! Yes—er—just a small one, sir."

" Say when."

He never knew when to say " when " ! The stuff

tasted like varnish, anyway. But it would look funny if he said he did not want any.

"Whisky takes away the taste of the water," remarked the other, pouring out so small a dose that it almost seemed as though he had read Raleigh's thought, "and water takes away the taste of the whisky. The result is that you get a drink which isn't too bad, and makes your feet warm. Have a cigarette?"

"Er—oh, thanks. Yes, I'd like one." He put his glass down on the table, and felt in his pocket for matches, which he knew he had not got.

"Here, we always use these." And his new friend pushed the bottle with the candle in it towards him.

"Of course! I never thought of that," laughed Raleigh nervously. "What an ass I am."

He lit his cigarette, and then raised his glass self-consciously: "Well, good luck, sir."

"Good luck! By the way, my name's Osborne. I'm second in command of the company. You only need to call me 'sir' in front of the men."

"I see. Thanks."

"You'll find the other officers call me 'Uncle.' They've no respect for grey hairs. What's your name?"

"Mine? My name's Raleigh."

"Any relation of the master at Rugby?"

"Not that I know of. But I've lots of uncles and —and things like that."

Osborne smoked for a few moments. The drink was helping Raleigh to feel at his ease, and he began to look at his companion a little more critically.

Must be quite forty-five, he decided. A very decent old buffer, but probably a bit dull. How funny it must be for Dennis to have to boss it over another officer double his age. Funny for Osborne, too, though he looked the type of man who wouldn't worry about it one way or another.

" Ever been up the line before ? " asked Osborne suddenly.

" Oh, no. You see, I only left Barford at the end of last summer term."

" Were you at school at Barford ? Why, the man in command of this company was there. Captain Stanhope. Did you know him ? "

" Rather ! " Did he know Stanhope indeed ! He could hardly refrain from laughing out loud. But perhaps it would be wise not to let Osborne know what pals he and Dennis had been. Things were so different out here, and it would not do to make it difficult for Dennis. " Did you see much of him then ? " Osborne asked.

" I was only a kid, and he was one of the monitors. He's three years older than I am. But it wasn't only that we were just at school together. Our fathers were friends, and Dennis used to come and stay with us in the holidays. Of course, at school I didn't see a great deal of him, but in the holidays we were terrific pals."

" I see," said Osborne slowly ; and he looked at Raleigh with a new interest. One would have said that the news disturbed him. " He's up in the front line at present, looking after the relief. He's a splendid chap."

" Isn't he ? He was skipper of Rugger at Barford, and kept wicket for the Eleven. A jolly good bat, too."

" Did you play Rugger—and cricket ? "

" Oh, yes. Of course, I wasn't in the same class as Dennis—I say, I suppose I ought to call him Captain Stanhope ? "

" Just ' Stanhope.' "

" I see. Thanks. Last time he was home on leave he came down to Barford. He'd just got his M.C. and been made a captain. He looked splendid ! It sort of—made me feel——"

" Keen ? " put in the other.

" Yes, that's it. Keen to get out here. I was frightfully keen to get into his regiment. I thought, perhaps, I might get to the same battalion. And now I've managed the same company."

" That's a stroke of luck."

" I know. It's amazing ! When I was at the base I did an awful thing. You see, my uncle's at the base—he has to detail officers to regiments——"

" General Raleigh ? " asked Osborne.

" Yes, that's right. I went to see him on the quiet, and asked him if he couldn't get me into this battalion. He nearly bit my head off, and said I'd got to be treated like everyone else ; but the very next day I was told I *was* coming to this battalion. Funny, wasn't it ? "

" Extraordinary coincidence ! " Osborne pulled a pipe out of his pocket, and began to fill it thoughtfully from an oiled silk tobacco-pouch. Then he looked up. " You'll find Stanhope changed, I expect.

You've got to remember he's commanded the company for a long time—through all sorts of rotten times. It's a very big strain on a man."

"Oh, it must be."

"If you notice much of a difference in him, you'll know it's only the strain. He's a very fine company commander."

There was something almost aggressive in Osborne's voice—as though he anticipated contradiction. Raleigh was wondering what to say or to think about it, when a soldier came out of the tunnel on the left. He carried a roll of white oilcloth, a pile of tin plates, and a grubby dishcloth. His braces appeared to serve only an ornamental purpose, since they were not hitched over the shoulders of his grey army shirt, but hung in loops at his sides. His hair was so smooth that either ration butter or rifle-oil must have been used for it.

"Can I lay supper, sir?" he asked.

Osborne turned to him with an expression of relief, as though he were glad to change the subject.

"Do, Mason," he said. "This is Mr. Raleigh. He's just joined the company."

Mason changed from a raffish-looking waiter in an East End fish-and-chips bar to a soldier. He clicked his heels smartly and held his plates almost as though he were carrying a rifle at the slope.

"Good evening, sir," he said, when he had relaxed his military attitude. "Nice and quiet up 'ere, sir."

"Good evening. Er—yes. I suppose it is."

Osborne tapped the ashes out of his pipe with slow, comfortable deliberation.

"What are you going to tempt us with to-night, Mason?"

Mason gave up the difficult task of remembering whether the knives went to the left or the right of the tin plates, and adopted the semi-familiar, semi-respectful pose which his position allowed when talking to officers.

"Soup, sir," he announced in a confidential tone, "cutlets, and pineapples."

Osborne raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

"What's that? Cutlets? What sort of cutlets?"

Mason looked embarrassed. "Well, sir, you've got me there. I shouldn't like to commit myself too deep, sir."

"Ordinary ration meat?"

"Yes, sir. Ordinary ration meat, but a noo shape, sir. Smells like liver, but it 'asn't got that smooth, wet look what liver's got."

"Well, I hope it's got a new taste."

"Yes, sir," agreed Mason, and he returned to the dugout in which he and the signallers lived. "New orficer turned up," he announced, as he fanned up the charcoal in his brazier. "One of them young chaps. Ought to be at school, but looks a decent sort of bloke. Keen! You know."

"So'm I keen," growled one of the signallers. "Keen on going 'ome."

"Well, you won't, except on a stretcher, so give us a 'and wiping these plates. The Keptin's so perticklar. Seeing me so smart-like, 'e forgets 'e ain't at the Ritz 'Otel."

"Is he the mess cook?" asked Raleigh.

"Yes. We'll fix you up with a servant. I expect you'll have to share one with Hibbert and Trotter—they're the other two subalterns. You'll sleep in that next dugout with them."

Osborne was cut short in his explanation by the return of Mason, whose hair, less smooth than it had been, bore witness to the fact that something had gone wrong.

"I've 'ad rather a unpleasant surprise, sir," he announced.

"What's happened?"

"You know that tin o' pineapple chunks I got, sir? Well, I'm sorry to say it's apricots."

Osborne laughed his slow, tolerant laugh.

"Good heavens! It must have given you a turn. Wasn't there a label on the tin?"

"No, sir. I pointed that out to the man at the canteen, and 'e said 'e was certain it was pineapple chunks. 'E said a leopard can't change its spots, sir."

"What have leopards got to do with pineapples?"

Mason looked cunning. "That's just what *I* thought, sir. Made me *think* there was something fishy about it. And, you see, sir, I know the Captain can't stand the sight of apricots. 'E said next time we 'ad them 'e'd wring my neck."

"Haven't you anything else?" asked Osborne, who took the matter with a seriousness which astonished the newcomer, still unable to realise that food and sleep were the most important subjects of thought and conversation to these tired, conflicting armies.

" There's a pink blanc-mange I've made, sir. But it ain't anywhere near stiff yet."

" Never mind. We must have the apricots and chance it."

" Very good, sir," said Mason, edging towards his own dugout. " Only I thought I'd tell you, sir, so as the Captain wouldn't blame me."

Osborne looked across the table at Raleigh. When he smiled there were dozens of little wrinkles round his eyes, and he looked much younger.

" He seems to be terrified of Dennis," Raleigh remarked.

" He's a bit quick-tempered," said Osborne, growing serious again. " You'll probably find that."

" Oh, I know old Dennis's temper," laughed the other. " I remember once at school he caught some chaps in a study with a bottle of whisky. Lord ! the roof nearly blew off. He gave them a dozen each with a cricket-stump."

Osborne smiled again, but a little grimly.

Raleigh looked towards the dugout steps. In a way he was rather glad Dennis took such a time coming down. It added to the fun of the surprise, this anticipation. And when the meeting was over he'd write and tell Madge all about it. She would be as bucked as he was. She, too, might have seen from a distance that endless line of Very lights shooting skywards and floating gently back to earth again. They would have given her, as they had given him, an overwhelming idea of the size of all this business. And that he should have managed to get to Dennis's company ! It was so exciting that he could not keep quiet about it.

"I can't get over this luck in getting to this company," he blurted out. "And my sister, she'll be terribly bucked about it, too."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. You see, as I told you, Dennis used to stay with us, and naturally my sister—well, perhaps I ought not——"

"Oh, that's all right," Osborne reassured him. "But I didn't actually know that Stanhope——"

"They're not—er—officially engaged. But they're awfully—well, awfully keen on each other. I'm jolly lucky to get here. And it's all so different from what I expected. It's so frightfully quiet——"

"It's often quiet like this."

"I thought there'd be an awful row here all the time."

"Most people think that," agreed Osborne, puffing deliberately at his pipe.

"I've never known anything quite like it before. I mean, I live in the country at home, and people think that's quiet. But there's always the rustling of animals in the leaves or grass, or a dog barking somewhere, or an owl hooting. But here, it's so different. Just now and then one hears a rifle firing, like the range at Bisley, and a sort of rumble in the distance."

"Those are the guns up north—up Wipers way. The guns are always going up there. I expect it's all very strange to you?"

"It's—it's not exactly what I thought. It's this—this quiet that seems so funny. There was one gun—a field-gun, I suppose—that fired once or twice as I came along. It seemed as though that one solitary

gun was keeping the whole war going by itself; there wasn't another sound."

"Yes, and a hundred yards from here the Germans are sitting in *their* dugouts thinking how quiet it is."

"Are they as near as that?"

"About a hundred yards."

"It seems—uncanny. It makes me feel we're—we're all just waiting for something."

"We are, generally, just waiting for something," agreed Osborne. "When anything happens, it happens quickly. Then we just start waiting again."

"If that there Captain don't 'urry up," grumbled Mason to a signaller, "this 'ere meat'll be so shrivelled up it won't look different from any other ration meat. And it did sound so much better as cutlets. The name don't 'arf make a difference!"

CHAPTER XV

Stanhope straightened himself, and struggled to get the straps of his pack over his shoulders. He caught it as it slipped to the ground, and heaved it wearily into a corner of the dugout. Then he took off his helmet and threw it on to the bed. The light from the candles in their bottles showed Raleigh a changed, a new, Stanhope, and yet it was hard to tell in what way there had been a change. He still wore his parting—" bug-run " as it was politely called at Barford—down the side, and his dark hair, slightly curly, was brushed back carefully as of old. His uniform was worn and stained, and yet, as always, he was more neatly dressed than anyone else. Raleigh's own uniform, of course, was newer and cleaner, but he immediately had the feeling that it did not fit properly. Stanhope's face was a little thinner, perhaps, but he had always had those rather hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes. Of course, he looked terribly tired—not at all as though he had just been " resting " in billets ; but he had looked tired before, after the match against the Trojans, for example, when he had rallied a despairing fifteen and, by sheer force of his personality, had made his team score tries and win the match, when it seemed that no try could be scored and that the match was lost. He was brown and weather-beaten, and yet it

seemed to Raleigh, who was not generally imaginative, as though he were pale, unhealthily pale, under this top layer of sun- and weather-burn.

Dennis Stanhope stared blankly at the flickering candles while he slowly took off his gas-satchel and undid the buckle of his webbing equipment, which he allowed to drop to the ground at his feet.

"Has Hardy gone?" he asked sharply.

Osborne nodded. "Cleared off a few minutes ago."

"Lucky for him he did. I'd a few words to say to Master Hardy. You never saw such a blasted mess as those fellows left the trenches in. Dugouts smell like cesspits—rusty bombs, damp rifle-grenades—it's perfectly foul."

Raleigh still remained unnoticed in the background. It would be such fun to give Dennis a surprise. His memory flashed back to a day when Madge and he had hidden at the station at Lyndhurst, so that Dennis, looking round vainly for friendly faces on the platform, had walked a little disconsolately towards the ticket barrier, and had been so bucked when they had suddenly sprung out of the waiting-room at him. And he'd never expect a meeting here, in this dugout a hundred yards away from the Germans.

"Mason!" summoned Stanhope sharply.

"Just coming, sir," came back Mason's voice from his dark cavern. "Just bringing the soup, sir. It's piping 'ot."

"Damn the soup! Bring some whisky."

Osborne made a little movement as though he

were going to protest. He thought better of it, and said, instead :

" Here's a new officer, Stanhope—just arrived."

" Oh, sorry. I didn't see you in this miserable light."

And he stood there, the same old Dennis, with that frank, honest smile of welcome on his face. This was the moment Jimmy had been waiting for, thinking about, wondering about, ever since he'd received Uncle Vincent's orders to join this battalion. He came out of the shadow. " Hullo, Stanhope," he said.

Stanhope started at the sound of his voice. He stared intently at the newcomer, concentrating all his attention on him. He did not notice Raleigh half raise his hand, and then let it drop to his side as he saw the other's expression.

" Why, Stanhope, what's the——" Raleigh began, but his question petered out lamely.

" How did you—get here ? " asked Stanhope in a low voice.

" I was told at battalion headquarters to report to you."

" I see. Rather a coincidence."

Raleigh laughed nervously. " Yes, isn't it ? " He glanced round the dugout to escape from that odd, unfriendly look in Dennis's eyes. There was something here he did not understand. A third officer whom he had not noticed before, but who must have been the man who had come down with Dennis—a fat, short man, with a round, red, polished face—was staring at him curiously. What on earth was it all about ?

Osborne—a well-meaning, kindly chap, Osborne —intervened.

"There's a terrible tragedy, Stanhope," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, as though he had noticed nothing unusual in this meeting. "Mason ordered pineapple chunks, and the tin turns out to be apricots."

The short, fat man spoke for the first time.

"Ha! Give me apricots every time! I can't stick pineapple chunks. Too blooming sickly for me."

Jimmy Raleigh felt in a vague way that they were trying to help him, these two men. But it couldn't be left like that. He and Dennis had always understood each other through and through. No; it couldn't be left like that.

"I'm awfully glad I got to your Company," he said, after a pause.

"When did you get here?"

"Well, I've only just come."

Osborne intervened again. "He just missed us in our billets, so they told him at the transport lines where we were, and he found his way up."

"I see," said Stanhope grimly.

Mason appeared with a bottle of whisky, a mug, and two plates of soup, of which a little slopped over at each step. He stood near the table, wondering helplessly how to put down the soup without upsetting the whisky, or the whisky without upsetting still more of the soup, until Osborne came to his rescue.

"Dinner, thank God!" exclaimed the red-faced little officer.

Stanhope shook himself. He suddenly sat down on the bed, and pulled one of the boxes over to the right of the table. "Come along, Uncle," he shouted, with a gaiety which both Osborne and Raleigh knew to be forced. "Come and sit here. You'd better sit over there, Raleigh." And he pointed to the farther side of the table.

The fat, red-faced little man came up to Raleigh.

"My name's Trotter," he said. "Glad to meet you."

He was so genial, so obviously pleased that this awkwardness which he did not understand seemed to have passed off, so uncomfortably compressed in a uniform which had become much too small for him, that he immediately won Raleigh's liking. Somehow the misunderstanding with Dennis would be cleared up, and meanwhile, with this shiny-faced Trotter, and with Osborne who, despite his grey hair, seemed to understand so well—with these two it was not going to be such bad fun with the company. The first meal was bound to be a little awkward—he was so little accustomed to this enforced sort of picnic—but he was beginning to feel more or less at home, and to forget the strange silence, emphasised by the occasional sharp crack of a rifle-bullet against a sandbag in the trench above.

"Been out 'ere before?" Trotter was asking. "Feels a bit odd, I s'pose."

"Yes. It does a bit."

Trotter let the conversation languish while he dragged up a box, sat on it, and found there was no room to get his legs under the table. He put the box

on its side, and was then so low down that his chin was hardly clear of his soup plate. This would not have mattered, since it would have saved him trouble in one way ; but, on the other hand, it involved so much effort to lift his elbow sufficiently high that, after two spoonfuls of soup, he got to his feet again, fetched his pack, and balanced himself on it.

" Pepper," he called. " Where's the pepper, Mason ? "

It would seem that Mason had expected—and feared—that question, for he hastened to explain how by some extraordinary accident, the pepper-pot had been left behind.

" But, damn it, we must have pepper." Trotter threw down his aluminium spoon into his tin plate with disgust. " We can't do without pepper. It gives things a flavour."

" Why wasn't it packed, Mason ? " asked Stanhope quietly.

" It—it was missed, sir."

" Why ? "

Mason shifted miserably from one foot to the other.

" Well, sir," he stammered at length, " I left it to——"

" Then I advise you never to leave it to anyone else again, unless you want to go back to your platoon in the trench. Send one of the signallers to me."

A soldier, answering to Mason's call for " Bert," appeared from the tunnel and saluted.

" Run over to ' A ' Company headquarters, and ask Captain Willis, with my compliments, if he can lend me a little pepper."

" A screw of pepper you asks for," Mason added in a whisper to the soldier, as he reached the foot of the dugout steps.

It seemed to Raleigh, whose perceptions were unusually keen in these novel surroundings, that the other officers had but one idea—to keep Dennis in a good temper. His anger had been feared at school, but not to this degree. Trotter, for example, went on grumbling in a soothing undertone, which was designed merely to support Dennis's action.

" After all, war's bad enough *with* pepper," he remarked between noisy sips, " but war without pepper—it's—it's bloody awful ! "

What *had* happened to Dennis Stanhope ?

" How are things in the line ? " asked Osborne. " Not much doing, is there ? "

" As quiet as a grave," agreed Stanhope.

" Calm before the storm," declared Trotter, who never missed a platitude. " 'Ullo, what's this ? " He looked suspiciously at the cutlets which Mason placed proudly on the table.

" Meat, sir."

" I know that. What sort ? "

" Sort of cutlet, sir."

" H'm. You know, Mason, there's cutlets and cutlets."

" I know, sir. That one's a cutlet."

" Well, it won't let me cut it."

Osborne groaned.

" For heaven's sake, shut up," he urged.

" You'll get double duty if you try that business of making puns," Stanhope threatened.

"No offence meant, skipper."

Trotter, silenced but not abashed, bent his head over his plate, and tackled his cutlet. Presently—when he had finished everything on his plate, in fact—he looked up. He was still puzzled by Stanhope's air of weariness, which, somehow, was linked up with the arrival of this pleasant-spoken youngster, Raleigh.

"Cheer up, skipper," he ventured. "You *do* look glum."

"I'm tired."

"Why not turn in to get some sleep after supper?" asked Osborne eagerly. "I'll do the duty roll, and see the sergeant-major, and any little thing like that."

"I've got hours of work before I turn in. So have the rest of us, for that matter." He turned to Raleigh. "Trotter goes on duty directly he's had supper. Now, in fact. He's relieving the other sub., Hibbert. You'd better go with him to learn the job."

"Oh, right!"

Raleigh's own voice was as non-committal and indifferent as Stanhope's. It would not do to let anyone see how much Dennis's behaviour hurt and puzzled him.

"There's tons of time," grumbled Trotter. "I ain't 'ad my apricots yet. And they need digesting afterwards."

"We'll keep them for you till you come back," Osborne promised.

"Not in 'ere, you won't. I know you all too well."

He instructed Mason to keep the fruit in his own

dugout until it was wanted, and rose to his feet, stretching prodigiously, in a way which showed that his tunic-buttons must be fastened on with good stout thread, and not ordinary, ladylike cotton.

" Come on, Raleigh, my lad," he said. " I never knew anything like a war for upsetting meals. I'm always down for dooty in the middle of one."

Stanhope laughed—almost the old laugh when he was ragging anyone at school. " That's because you never stop eating," he declared.

Raleigh stood in boyish uncertainty at Trotter's side. Did one wear full equipment on duty ? What was he expected to do ? He felt a little as he had felt when his father had taken him into a large London restaurant for the first time, and he had hesitated before that bewildering array of cutlery on each side of his plate.

" Just wear your belt with revolver-case on it," Trotter advised, after the manner of an ex-sergeant-major, well accustomed to fathering young subalterns. " Must have your revolver to shoot rats. None of your grouse moors out 'ere, but first-rate rat-'unting. Tuck your gas-mask under your chin like a serviette. And leave your stick at 'ome. It gets in your way if you have to run."

Raleigh laughed a little nervously. He did not know when Trotter was fooling and when he was serious.

" Why—er—we don't have to run, do we ? "

" Oh Lord, yes, often ! You wait until you see a ' minnie '—that's a big trench-mortar shell, you know ; short for minenwerfer. You wait until you

see one of those damned black things twisting over and over in the air, and then coming down, down, down. You won't ask then if we have to run. You'll run like stink, and, unless you judge well, you're just as likely to run into the bloomin' thing as away from it. 'Owever, you'll find all that out soon enough. Well, come on, my lad, let's go and see about this 'ere war. Cheero, Uncle ! Cheero, skipper ! Don't anyone pinch my apricots."

" Cheero," echoed Raleigh a little uncertainly, and he followed Trotter up the steps into the moonlit support trench.

CHAPTER XVI

Osborne stared after the departing couple thoughtfully. Then he turned to Stanhope, about to say what a decent fellow Raleigh seemed to be, but checked his words at the sight of Stanhope's face. He was often moody nowadays, which was not surprising, but this arrival of Raleigh had obviously upset him very seriously indeed. Osborne was wondering about it when Mason appeared at his dugout door.

"Will you take apricots, sir?"

"No, thanks."

"Mr. Osborne?"

"No, thanks."

"I'm sorry about them being apricots, sir. I explained to Mr. Osborne——"

"That's all right, Mason, thank you."

The tone of weary patience might so easily have changed to one of anger, that Mason gave up the attempt to excuse himself, and disappeared hastily.

"What about beds?" asked Osborne. "Will you sleep over in the corner? That was Hardy's bed, and it's in relatively decent condition."

Stanhope shook his head. "No. You sleep there. I'd rather sleep by the table here. I can get up and do a spot of work without disturbing you."

Osborne walked over to the bed in the corner and tested its wire netting covering. "This is a better one."

"You take it," the other insisted. "Must have a little comfort in your old age, Uncle."

Osborne turned back to the table. He was always a little frightened of "lecturing" people, and he tried hard at times to forget that he had ever been a schoolmaster. But perhaps he could make Stanhope listen to him. "Look here," he began, "why don't *you* get a little comfort? I wish you'd turn in and sleep for a bit."

"Sleep? I can't sleep." He took up the whisky-bottle and poured some carelessly into his tin mug. Osborne knew the futility of protesting. When Stanhope was in a state like this opposition did no good at all.

As Stanhope put the empty mug back on the table, Hibbert came down from the trench. He was even more pale than usual, and when he came into the feeble light of the candles he put his hand up to his forehead and rubbed it gently, as though to smooth away some pain. Small, slightly built, and narrow-shouldered, he was as unlike the old idea of a soldier as any man could well be, and only this national emergency which dressed almost every man in khaki saved him from being inconspicuous.

Stanhope stared at him. "Well, Hibbert?" he said questioningly.

"Everything's fairly quiet. Bit of sniping somewhere to our left, and one or two rifle-grenades coming over just on our right."

" I see. . . . Mason's got your supper."

Hibbert gently massaged his forehead again. " I don't think I can manage any supper to-night, Stanhope. It's this beastly neuralgia. It seems to get right inside this eye. The beastly pain gets worse every day."

Stanhope spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. " Some hot soup and a good tough chop'll put that right."

" I'm afraid the pain rather takes my appetite away." As the other made no sign, Hibbert went on : " I'm damned sorry to keep on talking about it, Stanhope, only I thought you'd wonder why I don't eat anything much."

" Try and forget about it."

Hibbert laughed without appreciation. " Well, I wish I could."

" Get tight," advised Stanhope, with a gesture of impatience.

" I think I'll turn straight in for a rest, and try to get some sleep."

" All right," sighed the other. " Turn in, then. You're in that dugout there, through the tunnel, and Trotter dumped your pack in that corner. You go on duty at two ; I take over from you at four. I'll tell Mason to call you."

Hibbert muttered a faint " Cheero," took a new candle that was lying on the table, lit it over another candle, and disappeared, with his slow, shuffling walk, into his own dugout.

Stanhope shrugged his shoulders angrily, and turned to Osborne. " Another little worm trying to wriggle home," he said.

Osborne filled his pipe with that careful deliberation which marked all his movements. At school his ability to understand the other man's point of view—even the boy's point of view—had enabled him to keep his form in better order than any of his colleagues, although he had punished much less often. " I wonder if he really is bad," he reflected. " He looks rotten."

But Stanhope was not in a mood to be tolerant. " It's pure bloody funk, that's all," he declared. " He could eat if he wanted to ; he's starving himself purposely. Artful little swine ! Neuralgia's a splendid idea. No proof, as far as I can see."

" You can't help feeling sorry for him. He's tried hard."

" How long's he been out here ? Three months, I suppose. Now he's decided he's done his bit. He's decided to go home and spend the rest of the war in comfortable nerve hospitals. Well, he's mistaken. I let Warren get away like that, but no more."

Osborne puffed away at his pipe. " I don't see how you can prevent a fellow going sick," he remarked at length.

" I'll have a quiet word with the doctor before *he* does. He thinks he's going to wriggle off just before the attack. But he won't. No man of mine's going sick before the attack. They're going to take an equal chance—together."

He held up the whisky-bottle to the light, and noted, with slightly raised eyebrows, how rapidly the level of the liquid was sinking. Then he offered a drink to Osborne, who refused it, poured one out

for himself, and drank it at a gulp. "The bloody little funk!" he mumbled.

The older man gave it up, and changed the subject. "Raleigh looks a nice chap."

The remark had an extraordinary effect on Stanhope—it was almost as though a bucket of cold water had been poured over him. He assented curtly.

"Good-looking youngster, too. At school with you, wasn't he?"

Stanhope scowled. "Has he been talking already?"

"My dear fellow," laughed Osborne, "what a state you're in to-night. Talking? No, he's not been talking. He just mentioned it. It was a natural thing to tell me when he knew you were in command. He's awfully pleased to get into your company."

Stanhope stretched across the table and picked up a magazine. He glanced through it without saying a word, and then began to draw meaningless geometrical designs on its cover with a stump of a pencil.

"He seems to think a lot of you," went on Osborne.

The other laughed grimly. "Yes, I'm his hero."

Osborne thought rather of Stanhope than of Raleigh. "So much the better," he said. "Besides, it's natural. Small boys at school generally have their heroes."

"Yes, small boys at school!"

"Often it goes on as long as——"

Stanhope interrupted him. "As long as the hero's a hero."

"It often goes on as long as life does," Osborne finished quietly.

The stump of a pencil continued its complicated pattern of straight lines; the older man leant back against one of the props of the dugout roof, and watched his tobacco-smoke rise slowly until it reached the ceiling of corrugated iron, and then spread out softly into nothingness.

"How many battalions are there in France?" asked Stanhope suddenly.

"Heaven knows! Why?"

"We'll say fifty Divisions. That's a hundred and fifty brigades—four hundred and fifty battalions." He did a little sum on the back of his magazine. "That's one thousand eight hundred companies. There are one thousand eight hundred companies in France, Uncle. Raleigh might have been sent to any one of them, and, my God! he comes to me!"

"You ought to be jolly glad. He's a good-looking youngster. I like him."

"I knew you'd like him. Personality, isn't it?" Stanhope hesitated for a moment or two, his fingers playing with the button of his tunic-pocket. Then he took out a worn leather case and found a small photograph, which he passed across to Osborne. "I've never shown you that, have I?"

Osborne studied the snapshot carefully.

"No. Raleigh's sister, isn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"There's a strong likeness. She's an awfully nice-looking girl."

"A photo doesn't show much," Stanhope pointed out apologetically. "Just a face."

"Well, she looks awfully nice," Osborne insisted. "You're a lucky chap."

Stanhope carefully replaced the photograph amongst some letters in his pocket-case.

"I don't know why I keep it, really," he said, as though he were reluctant to let the subject drop.

"Why? Isn't she—I thought——"

"What did you think?"

"Well, I thought that perhaps she was waiting for you."

"Yes," said Stanhope bitterly. "She *is* waiting for me, and she doesn't know. She thinks I'm a wonderful chap—commanding a company. She doesn't know my nerve's gone; that, if I went up those steps into the front line without being doped with whisky, I'd go mad with fright."

"Don't talk rot," protested Osborne. Then he leant forward across the table, pointing with the mouthpiece of his pipe to emphasise what he was going to say. "Look here, old man," he began a little hesitatingly. "I've meant to speak about it for a long time, but it sounds damned impudence. You've done longer out here than any man in the battalion, and you've refused every soft job that's been offered you. It's time you went away for a rest. It's due to you."

"You suggest that I go sick, like that little worm in there—neuralgia in the eye?" Stanhope laughed

bitterly, and poured himself out another drink.

"No. Not that. The colonel would have sent you down long ago, only he won't suggest it himself because he can't spare you . . ."

"Oh, rot!"

"He's told me so."

"He thinks I'm in such a state I want a rest, is that it?"

"No, no," Osborne assured him soothingly. "He thinks it's due to you."

"It's all right, Uncle. I'll stick it out now. It may not be much longer now. I've had my share of luck—more than my share. But it's rather damnable for that boy—of all the boys in the world—to have come here. I might at least have been spared that."

"You're looking at things in rather a black sort of way."

"And haven't I every reason to?" Stanhope asked, with a shrill, nervous note in his voice. He poured out another whisky, paying no heed to Osborne's slight movement of protest. Then he went on in another tone. "It's funny about his sister. I used to go and stay at their place during the holidays—Raleigh's father knew mine. At first I thought of her as another kid like Raleigh. Things changed a bit during the last day before war broke out, when the three of us went for an excursion together, and I couldn't help thinking how definitely all that sort of life was going to come to an end—for me, at any rate. And then when I went home on my first leave I realised what a topping girl she was. Funny how you realise it suddenly. I just prayed to

come through the war—and—and *do* things—and keep absolutely fit for her."

Osborne removed his pipe. "You've done pretty well," he said. "An M.C. and a company."

Stanhope went on as though he had not heard the encouragement. "It was all right at first. I only saw her once after that first leave, because she came out to France, and we've never been able to fix things up. I spent my last leave, as you know, in Paris, because she'd gone back home again, and I couldn't bear to meet her in case she realised. It was that awful affair on Vimy Ridge that did me down. I knew I'd go mad if I didn't break the strain. I couldn't bear being fully conscious all the time. *You*'ve felt that, Uncle, haven't you?"

"Often," agreed Osborne.

"There were only two ways of breaking the strain. One was pretending I was ill, and getting home; the other was this." He raised his glass. "Which would you pick, Uncle?"

"I haven't been through as much as you. I don't know yet."

"I thought it all out. It's a slimy thing to go home if you're not really ill, so Cheero! And long live the men who go home with neuralgia!"

Osborne did not drink the toast. Instead he nodded towards the whisky-bottle. "When the war's over, and the strain's gone, you'll chuck all that up. And you'll soon be as fit as ever, at your age."

"I've hoped that all the time. It might have worked. If only Raleigh had gone to one of those other one thousand eight hundred companies."

"I don't see why you should think——"

Stanhope interrupted him. "Oh, for the Lord's sake, don't be a damn fool. *You* know! You know he'll write and tell her I reek of whisky all day." He poured himself out some more drink; his hand was so unsteady that part of it splashed on to the table and over Hardy's tattered trench map.

"Nonsense," Osborne protested. "Why should he write like that? He's not a——"

"Exactly. He's not a damned little swine who'd deceive his sister. It's no good, Uncle. Didn't you see him sitting there, all through supper, staring at me and wondering. He's up in those trenches now—still wondering—and beginning to understand. And all these months he's wanted to be with me out here. Poor little devil!"

"I believe Raleigh'll go on liking you and looking up to you through everything. There's something very deep, and rather fine, about hero-worship."

"Hero-worship be damned!" Stanhope paused, and then went on in a strange, high-pitched voice: "You know, Uncle, I'm an awful fool. I'm *captain* of this company. What's that bloody little prig of a boy matter? That's what he is—a little prig. Wants to write home and tell Madge all about me. Well, he won't, d'you see, Uncle? He *won't* write. Censorship! I censor his letters—cross out all he says about me."

"You can't read his letters," Osborne protested.

"Cross out all he says about me," repeated Stanhope dreamily. "Then we all go west in the big attack, and she goes on thinking I'm a fine fellow for ever—and ever—and ever."

Osborne rose from his bed, picked up Stanhope's pack, and pulled out the blanket.

"Come along, old chap. You come and lie down here," he urged persuasively. He put the pack at the head of the bed to act as a pillow and spread out the blankets.

Stanhope sat with his elbows on the table, his chin propped on his hands.

"Little prig—that's what he is," he argued. "Did *I* ask him to force his way into my company? No, I didn't. Very well, then, he'll pay for his damned cheek."

"Come on," urged Osborne, and he put his hand gently on Stanhope's shoulder.

Stanhope shook it off roughly. "Go away!" he ordered. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"Come and lie down and go to sleep."

"Go to sleep y'self. I censor his letters, d'you see, Uncle? You watch and see he doesn't smuggle any letters away."

"Righto. Now come and lie down. You've had a hard day of it."

Stanhope rose unsteadily to his feet. "Where's Hardy?" he asked sharply. "D'you say he's gone?"

"Yes, he's gone."

"Gone, has he? Y'know, I had a word to say to Master Hardy. He would go, the swine! Dirty trenches—everything dirty. I wanner tell him to keep his trenches clean."

"We'll clean them up to-morrow," Osborne assured him. "I'll see to that."

Stanhope looked at his companion, and laughed gaily. Then he seized him round the middle and tried to dance a few steps with him. " Dear old Uncle ! " he cried. " Clean trenches up with a little dustpan and brush. Make you a little apron—with lace on it."

" That'll be fine. Now, then, come along, old chap. I'll see you get called at two o'clock. You *must* be tired."

Stanhope allowed Osborne to lead him to the bed and help him on to it. " God ! " he muttered. " I'm bloody tired. Ache all over—feel sick."

' You'll be all right in a minute." Osborne put the blanket over him. " How's that ? " he asked. " Comfortable ? "

" Yes. Comfortable." He looked up into Osborne's face and laughed again. " Dear old Uncle. Tuck me up."

" There we are."

" Kiss me, Uncle."

" Kiss you be blowed ! You go to sleep ! "

Stanhope closed his eyes. " Yes—I go sleep." He gave a deep sigh and began to breathe heavily.

Osborne stood watching him and thinking how young he looked. Hardly more, really, than a schoolboy. And three years of this ! It was all a rum business.

He turned away and walked over to the entrance to the servants' dugout. " Mason," he called in a low voice.

Mason appeared with unbuttoned tunic. " Yes-sir ? "

"Will you call me at ten minutes to eleven? I'm going to turn in for a little while."

"Very good, sir," said Mason; and then he added: "The pepper's come, sir."

"Oh, good."

"I'm very sorry about the pepper, sir."

"That's all right, Mason. Good night."

Osborne left alone strolled across to the dugout steps. From his breast-pocket he drew an old-fashioned silver watch. He wound it carefully with a little key, while he stared out into the starlit night.

CHAPTER XVII

"Mind yer nut," said Trotter, as Raleigh followed him up the steep, earthy steps to his first duty in the trenches. "These tin 'ats 'ave saved many a skull from being cracked on low roofs."

They stood together in the trench while Trotter wheezily regained his breath. The crisp, cool air and the grey darkness of the night were startling in contrast to the stuffy, candle-lit dugout. There had been a dense, solid stillness down there, a stillness which had made voices hollow and unreal. Up here in the trenches it was different, a vague, awe-inspiring *something* lay over them. There were sounds—sounds which Raleigh did not understand. Sometimes there was the dull, far-off rumble that he had heard before. It came now, it seemed, with each light rustle of the breeze. Shadows crept slowly here and there with the rise and fall of Very lights. Now and then machine-guns rapped out vigorously and single rifles cracked. The sounds of the bullets passing overhead were like long-drawn-out sighs. Then there were intervals of silence, broken by the low drone of talking men, and once a big shell passed high above the clouds, bringing to them the quiet sound of a rippling stream.

Trotter had at last regained his breath.

"The job of an officer on dooty," he began, "is to see everything's all right."

He paused, and, as Raleigh realised that something was expected of him, he murmured, " I see," and " Thanks."

" Now," continued Trotter briskly, " let's begin."

A few yards along the support line brought them to a trench which branched off to the left. Trotter turned into it.

" This," he announced, " takes us up into the front line."

There seemed no plan or reason in this winding trench ; it took a roaming course like a woodland path. Trotter stopped abruptly after turning a few corners.

" 'Ullo," he said.

" Hullo," came a thin, cultured voice.

An officer rose from where he had been leaning in the shadows. " Everything's O.K.," he said. " Here's the Very pistol."

He handed a large-barrelled pistol to Trotter, and followed it with a handful of cartridges from his tunic pocket. Then more carefully—almost reverently —he produced three additional cartridges from his breast-pocket. " The coloured ones," he murmured as he handed them to Trotter, who, in turn, carefully placed them in a separate pocket to the other cartridges.

" Righto," said Trotter. " Better go and get your supper."

" Right ! Cheero ! " The officer squeezed past them in the narrow trench, giving Raleigh a fleeting, inquisitive glance and a slight smile. Raleigh caught

a glimpse of a rather girlish face that seemed peaked and grey in the darkness.

" 'Ibbert," announced Trotter, as he resumed his way. " Bit windy, 'e is."

He then proceeded to explain to Raleigh that the officer on duty always carried a pistol for firing Very lights, and, besides the usual white lights, they had three coloured ones which acted as signals in case of sudden alarm.

" You got to keep 'em carefully separate, because you can't see their markings in the dark. I nearly ended the war once—sending up a red one by mistake. And here," he continued, with a note of pride in his voice, as a lecturer when he comes to his best lantern slide, " here we are in the front line."

It was merely a place where the trench joined another that ran at right angles ; no different, in the darkness, from those that Raleigh had been in since —seemingly months, but actually only a few hours ago—he had turned from the sunken road into the deep trench across the plains. Yet never in his life before had he felt the warm thrill of pride that came to him quite suddenly and unexpectedly on Trotter's words. He was in the British front line, facing the Germans with no one in front of him, but many thousands behind. All those French people, quietly working in their fields, his own father, Madge, the fellows at Barford—they were all sleeping now, easy and secure because there were men in the British front line.

A few yards to the right he could dimly make out two soldiers on a fire-step, their heads and shoulders

silhouetted against a falling light. A sheet of corrugated iron spanned the trench below, and two more figures sat dozing beneath its cover.

" This 'ere's a sap," said Trotter, taking a narrow, tortuous trench which jutted out ahead ; " leads you out to sixty yards of the Boche."

The sap was shallower than the front line, and Trotter walked slightly doubled up.

" Keep yer 'ead down day and night's my motto. No point in being silly. 'Ead down and belly full—that's been my motto all through. Many a man's taken a bullet through being afraid of people seeing 'im keep 'is 'ead down."

The sap became narrower towards its end, and finally opened into a small, scooped-out recess. Two sentries lay motionless on the sloping side.

" Oo's that ? " came a hoarse voice.

" Officer on dooty," replied Trotter.

The man turned and resumed his vigil. Trotter crept up softly and lay beside him, and a murmured conversation followed. Raleigh crouched behind and waited. Beyond the heads of the sentries he could see a sprawling maze of wire, linked here and there to iron pickets that stuck crazily out of the tumbled earth. Beyond lay a black desolation, which seemed to swell and shrink as the lights threw shadows over it. When a Very light fell near them it lit a low, crazy ridge ahead, which might have been the German parapet—so near that it thrilled him, and, in turn, made him vaguely afraid. As Trotter drew back he asked the question.

" Yes," said Trotter in a low voice, " that's the

Boche front line. Boche looking over this way now, maybe, just as we are—d'you play cricket?" he added somewhat irrelevantly.

"A bit," said Raleigh.

"Could you chuck a cricket ball that distance?"

"I think so."

"Then you could do the same with a Mills bomb."

There was a pause. Raleigh smiled, not knowing what to say.

"But you won't, though," said Trotter, leading the way back towards the front line. "Come on; let sleeping dogs lie. If we was to throw a bomb you can bet yer boots the old Boche would chuck one back, and Mr. Digby and Mr. 'Arris, lying there, are both married men with kids. Wouldn't be—be cricket, would it?" he added brightly.

"No," said Raleigh. But it was all very strange It was so different from his thoughts of war. "Two married men with kids" lying there in the dark sixty yards from the Germans. No, it wouldn't be cricket to chuck a bomb at the enemy, because they would throw one back; and that wouldn't be right, with "two married men with kids" lying there. He had never thought of that before. A soldier was a soldier—and that was all there was to it. He fought and, if necessary, died. It had not occurred to Raleigh before that the death of any one of these men would leave a trail of unquenchable sorrow behind.

Back in the front line once more, he followed Trotter to the further end, where lay the first sentry group of the neighbouring company. There was not much to see. The company guarded a wide section

of the thinly-held front line. Every fifty yards they had a sentry group of six men, sometimes with a Lewis gun. Two men were always standing on the fire-step, looking out into No Man's Land ; two, near-by, dozed on the fire-step ; two more slept usually in a little alcove dug in the trench side with a ground-sheet covering its entrance. A corporal was in charge of each group, and as Trotter came along a few words passed. Generally Trotter would stand up beside the sentries and talk to them, discuss the land ahead. At one place they could see the ruins of Beauvais Farm ; a gaunt finger of brickwork pointed to the sky as if accusing the heavens for what had fallen and destroyed it. Sometimes Trotter would load the Very pistol, crouch in the trench, and fire the light at a steep angle towards the German trenches. He would then go quickly down the line and jump on the fire-step to watch the light fall brilliantly over the enemy's position.

" Always keep the pistol low when you fire," counselled Trotter, " or they may see the flash. And never stand up just where you fire it, or you may get sniped."

He turned to Raleigh and smiled. They were standing together somewhere in the centre of the piece of line they guarded, leaning back against the trench wall in a deep fire-bay. The night had grown quieter now. The machine-guns rapped out less frequently, as if the Germans were growing tired and sleepy. Once, several vicious little explosions came from the right, and Raleigh could see showers of yellow sparks shoot up from the ground.

" Aerial darts," said Trotter, " nasty little German shells which they fire off rods, sort of like a catapult. On ' B ' Company, I should guess. Good old ' B ' Company."

He turned and glanced at Raleigh with a little chuckle of laughter. Raleigh returned the glance as Trotter looked away. There was something very likeable about this fat cheerful man, who gave off a faint odour of carbolic soap. During supper Raleigh had had a back view of Trotter, who had sat sideways to the table to get more room ; he had seen a rough red neck, pitted with little scars ; a large fold of fat projected when Trotter raised his head. He had made a good deal of noise with his food, and wiped his mouth with the back of his big red hand. Raleigh's instinct for friendship had never permitted snobbery to become part of his creed, but his upbringing had made it impossible for him to meet and understand those who had been cast in rougher moulds. At home he had learnt to enjoy, under his father's encouragement, the society of everyone round Alum Green, no matter what their station. Often he had accompanied old Medley on his round of delivering letters, but these associations had never extended to their homes and eating with them. Trotter had surprised him considerably at first—the only Londoner of this kind he had met before was the school porter at Barford, who often on dark winter evenings sighed loudly for the lights of Bermondsey. Raleigh was never for an instant conscious of a class superiority ; he simply felt that such a gulf must exist between himself and these people that no effort of his or theirs

could bridge it. As they dressed differently, spoke differently, walked differently, must even think differently, then for each other's sakes they should go their different ways. It was only natural that he should regard Trotter as an odd being which had never crossed his path before ; it was natural, too, that the thought of passing three hours alone with him in the trenches should be a source of keen embarrassment. What could they talk about ? what possible link could they find to join each other on common ground ?

And now, as they stood resting together in this deep fire-bay, Raleigh realised that over an hour had passed without the slightest embarrassment. True, there had been a great deal to see, an amazing experience of mystery and excitement, but they had talked steadily all the while, always quietly, sometimes in a whisper, when at the sap head—although the best whisper Trotter could manage was an odd husky, croaking sound. Trotter, of course, had done most of the talking. He never tired of explaining the equipment of trench warfare to the boy, the odd sounds, the mysterious lights. He listened attentively to Raleigh's questions, and answered with measured care.

But now, as they stood alone, with nothing for the moment to distract them, Raleigh began to feel a longer pause between Trotter's explanations ; he realised that Trotter was fighting as hard as he could to keep things going. But the battle was a losing one. Soon a long silence fell. Trotter sang quietly the words of an old music-hall song, and Raleigh gave a

little laugh to show his appreciation. What *could* he say? He realised with shame that Trotter had led almost every topic of conversation, and he had followed lamely behind. What would interest this friendly little man? Motoring? Surely not—it would embarrass him to admit that he had never had a car. What could he know of a school like Barford? He was thinking so furiously that Trotter's voice quite startled him.

"You married?" he asked—then apparently relenting, hastily went on—"er, course not—I don't suppose you've been out of school long?"

"No. I only left a few months ago."

"Were you top?" enquired Trotter.

Raleigh feverishly groped for understanding. Top? "No," he said. "I wasn't frightfully good at work, I'm afraid."

"Oh, well," mused Trotter, "it's over twenty years since I done with school—and I wasn't great at work neither. What's your part of the world?"

"I live down in the New Forest."

"What, Bournemouth way?"

"Yes."

"I used to do from Bournemouth, all along the coast to Margate, till I got pushed into a London district."

"How d'you mean?" enquired Raleigh.

"Travelling," said Trotter vaguely.

"That must be rather interesting, seeing the country?"

"You soon see it all once, then it don't hold

anything new. The job to get's a London district—you get home at nights then. I was doing S.E. down to Sevenoaks when I joined up—just getting a decent connection worked up. Gawd knows what'll happen when I go back. What's your job going to be?"

"I did think of doctoring—but I'm not very keen. I rather thought of engineering."

"My young nephew's engineering—in the shops at Birmingham."

Again a silence fell. Then Raleigh remembered Trotter's allusion to throwing a cricket ball into the German trenches. Osborne too had asked him if he played cricket—perhaps they talked cricket sometimes. He turned to Trotter and asked him if he played.

"Cricket?" said Trotter. "Oh, I used to play years ago for the old Grasshoppers at Clapham. 'Ad a pitch on the common—used to get a decent crowd along on a Saturday—used to call me 'Old Banghard' because I tried to wallop——"

He chuckled to himself and began to warm up; he was in the middle of a match in which he was 20 not out, when a sergeant loomed round the corner and stood beside them.

"Barton's got a bad cough, sir. I was thinking we better keep 'im out of the sap and put 'im on duty back here."

"Yes," agreed Trotter; "'e's making too much row up there."

Raleigh had noticed a thin, hacking cough each time they had passed the group which held the sap.

The sergeant accompanied the two officers to the dugout where Barton lay, and Trotter crawled in to see the man.

Raleigh found the sergeant a pleasant companion as they waited outside.

"Just got here, sir?"

"Yes."

"You've come to the right company, sir."

Perhaps it was this remark by the sergeant which led to it, but quite suddenly Raleigh found himself telling his companion that he had been at school with Stanhope and that they had long been friends.

Trotter reappeared and instructed the sergeant to remove Barton to a post in the support line where his cough was less likely to be heard.

And when the two officers started upon another tour of their trenches, Raleigh walked with a light heart because of some things the sergeant had said of Captain Stanhope, his friend.

CHAPTER XVIII

Although Osborne made very little noise when he went on duty the movement in the dugout sufficed to rouse Stanhope, who had been sleeping uneasily. His blanket had slipped off him and a hard lump in his pack, which served as a pillow, had given him a stiff neck. There was a stale taste in his mouth, his head ached abominably, and he had a feeling of depression amounting almost to despair. He sat up in bed and reached for the whisky-bottle.

After the fresh night air the musty stale smell which greeted them as they came down the dugout steps almost made Raleigh recoil. Even Trotter, who was leading the way, looked back half apologetically.

" It's mostly those there rats," he explained.

The dugout itself was lit by one candle which stood on the table in an empty fruit tin, the top of which had been bent to the perpendicular to act as a reflector. Stanhope was within its small zone of illumination, and, with his tousled, untidy hair and the dark lines under his eyes, he bore very little resemblance to the Dennis Jimmy Raleigh had known at Barford. The smell of stale whisky almost made the newcomer feel sick, and he stared in bewilderment.

" 'Ullo, skipper," said Trotter, " not asleep ? "

Stanhope made no reply. He emptied the mug of

whisky and turned round towards the wall, even before Trotter had had time to ask Mason for two cups of cocoa. Raleigh followed Trotter miserably into the other dugout, where Hibbert lay asleep, only a little tuft of hair showing above the blankets.

While they were waiting for their cocoa, Trotter gave him the advice of an old campaigner. First of all he pointed out how newspapers spread out on the bed made it appear less hard and uncomfortable. Then he helped him to hang a little parcel of his provisions by a string from the ceiling, so that the rats could not get at them. Lastly, he produced a large biscuit tin which he fixed up against the wall to act as a larder for those tinned things which the rats could not eat, and as a bookcase and dressing-table combined. Raleigh enjoyed turning this one corner of the dugout into a temporary home, for it all added to the feeling of romantic adventure in a place which was so much more prosaic and sordid than he had ever anticipated. While he sat on a rough wooden box drinking cocoa with Trotter he was reminded of the drinks he and Dennis and other children had warmed up in tins over camp fires in the days when they had played at Indians and cowboys.

Trotter explained that they must keep their boots on, but that collar and tie might be removed. In a moment or two they were both rolled up in their blankets and the candle had been blown out. The stillness was occasionally broken by the muffled tapping of a machine-gun and, once, by the bursting of a heavy shell, which made the walls of the dugout shiver. Raleigh, listening for these noises of war, told

himself that he would never fall asleep. It was all too big and exciting. After so many efforts to picture to himself what it would be like at the Front, here he lay within a hundred yards of the Germans. All this O.T.C. training at school, the months of strenuous life with the Special Reserve battalion, the hours at the base, and the long journey up the line, had culminated in this dugout. It was so thrilling, he told himself, there was so much to analyse and to think about, that sleep was out of the question.

But within five minutes he was sleeping as soundly as Trotter, and it seemed to him that he had hardly dozed off before he heard, in a confused way, somebody shouting in the dugout, and awoke to find Hammond, the servant he shared temporarily with Trotter and Hibbert, standing by his side.

Hammond held a candle in one hand and was gently nudging his officer or, as he would call him in the security of his own dugout, his " bloke," with the first finger of the other. " It's time to get up, sir," he said. " ' Stand to ' in a few minutes."

" Stand to "—that meant the moment had arrived when all the way down both sides of No Man's Land, from the coast to the Swiss mountains, men waited on the alert. For perhaps an hour, until darkness gave way definitely to daylight, there was the danger of uneven rows of grey figures stumbling to the attack across this battered territory which, so far, he had only seen under the fantastic illumination of Very lights.

Someone was already bustling about the dugout, whistling through his teeth as a groom does when

brushing down a horse. It was Trotter, who was hurrying into his equipment. The third fellow, Hibbert, still lay on his back, reluctant to move.

Raleigh, fully awake at last, struggled out of his sleeping sack and began to do up his collar.

"Mornin', Raleigh," said Trotter cheerfully, "'ow do you like your feather mattress?" Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned to Hibbert: "What about getting a move on, Hibbert?" he asked.

Hibbert stretched himself slowly. "No great hurry," he said, "there's no train to catch."

"You'll catch it if you don't buck up," said Trotter, "but it won't be a train."

Raleigh, remembering how Dennis had looked when they came down to the dugout last night, hurriedly fastened his equipment and went into the other dugout. Stanhope was on duty and Osborne had already gone up to the trench. While he hesitated as to whether he, too, should go up and see what he was supposed to do when he got there, Trotter came bustling past.

"Better come along with me," he said.

It was still quite dark, but one knew that the dawn was at hand because of the quietness and the cold fresh breeze that came in gusts. It seemed, too, that the stars in the east were turning slightly pale. To Raleigh it was quite uncannily quiet. He had not much imagination, and it seemed almost impossible to believe that somewhere in the darkness beyond the front line the Germans were waiting, as the British were waiting here, for an attack. Ever so far

away to the north there must be some sort of bombardment, for the almost incessant rumble of guns came very faintly to his ears like distant thunder on a summer evening.

"They don't 'arf 'ate each other up there by Wipers," commented Trotter. He led the way, clattering along over the duckboards to the firing line, where rows of sentries, standing on the fire-step, peered into No Man's Land. From time to time, with a sharp hiss and a little trail of sparks, a Very light shot up into the air, burst into vivid incandescence, and floated slowly downwards, showing up this row of sentries in dark silhouette. Raleigh went along to his own platoon, talked a while to the sergeant, peered, too, into No Man's Land, and longed for the time when the command would be given to "stand down," so that he could get a wash, a shave, and some breakfast.

Further along the trench, where the sap ran out towards the German line, Stanhope went from sentry to sentry. He could chat to the men with a friendliness which even Osborne, being more reserved, could never have achieved, and which led to too much familiarity when imitated by Trotter. Despite his keen sense of discipline and the increasing uncertainty of his moods, every man in the company would rather have gone to him than to any other officer for help or advice. And the older the soldier, the greater became his confidence in the Captain.

Someone passed along word that the Colonel was up in the line, and Stanhope met him just where the sap joined the main trench. He was accompanied

by Trotter—since this was the sector occupied by his platoon—and by an orderly.

"Good morning, Stanhope," he said. "I want a word with you."

"Right, sir." He stepped up on the fire platform, and peered over No Man's Land. The white line of the German sandbags was now plainly visible, and the sky behind them was clear, with a faint golden haze on the horizon. He turned to Trotter. "You might tell Osborne to carry on for the time being," he said. "Better give them another ten minutes before they stand down."

Then he sat down with the Colonel on the fire-step to hear the news.

"It's about this German attack," the Colonel explained. "'D' Company took a prisoner last night, and he says it's coming, probably on the 21st."

"The 21st? That's the day after to-morrow."

"Yes, and I wanted to let you know that when it does come we can't expect much support from behind."

"I see," said Stanhope grimly.

"You'll have to stay where you are—as long as you can."

"As long as we can, sir?"

"That's it; you know what that means."

"Quite, sir. We'll stay all right."

"Good," said the Colonel; "now I must be off. I've got the news to break to the other companies. We've got to cling on by our eyelashes. Well, cheero, Stanhope."

"Cheero, sir."

The Colonel disappeared, followed by his orderly, and Stanhope spent half an hour going round with the sergeant-major to see where the wire needed strengthening. As he explained later in the day, at a second interview with the sergeant-major, even if the companies on their flanks gave way, "C" Company had to stick it. Therefore they must spend all their time between now and Thursday morning putting out new wire, even down both flanks.

The sergeant-major wrote down all orders with a stubby little pencil in a dirty note-book. When Stanhope had finished he hesitated, cleared his throat, and admitted there was one point on which he was not quite clear.

"When the attack comes, sir, of course we beat 'em off. But what if they keep on attacking?" he asked.

"Then we keep beating them off."

"Yes, sir. But what I mean is—they're bound to make a big thing of it."

"Oh, I think they will," Stanhope agreed cheerily.

"Well then, sir, if they don't get through the first day, they'll attack the next day, and the next."

Stanhope nodded.

"Then oughtn't we to fix up something about, well—er—falling back?"

"There's no need to. You see, this company's a lot better than 'A' or 'B' on either side of us. If anyone breaks, they'll break before we do. As long as we stick here we can fire into the Boche as they try to get through the gaps on our sides; we'll make a hell of a mess of them. We might delay the advance a whole day."

" Yes, sir," went on the sergeant-major diffidently. " But what 'appens when the Boche 'as got all round the back of us ? "

" Then we advance and win the war."

The sergeant-major pretended to note it down in his little book. " Win the war," he echoed. " Very good, sir."

" But you understand exactly what I mean, sergeant-major. Our orders are to stick here. If you're told to stick where you are, you don't make plans to retire. We've been waiting for this long enough, and now we're going to get it."

" Quite, sir," agreed the sergeant-major, and he went off pensively to make arrangements for wiring parties.

CHAPTER XIX

A man appeared round the traverse and came up to Raleigh.

" Please, sir, the Captain told me to say ' stand down.' Shall I pass the word along ? "

Raleigh nodded. In the space of a few moments the whole trench was busy with men chopping wood, kindling fires, cleaning rifles with oily pieces of rag, and washing themselves in buckets. From the entrance to each dugout there issued a strong smell of cooking which, unpleasant in itself, mercifully drowned the sickening odours of dirt and dried sweat, smoke and rats. With the help of a tin mug full of hot water, an army razor, a good lather and a periscope mirror, men were trying to make themselves look respectable. Already Graham, who had once been a barber in Fulham, was busy with his horse clippers, cutting ridges in the hair of a corporal who was due for leave.

" There y'are, Corps," he declared proudly. " You'll look so smart your best girl won't never believe you've seen no fighting, that she won't ! "

While the dixies were heating for morning tea, a few men got out paper and stumps of indelible pencils and began writing laborious letters home. At any rate until Fritz started off with his " minnies " again, or until the British began tempting Providence with

rifle-grenades or shrapnel, the war was forgotten.

Outside the officers' dugout Trotter, stripped to the waist, was bent nearly double over his collapsible bucket while he soaped himself with that energy and thoroughness which always made his face shine. He puffed and blew and shivered noisily, and only paused when Raleigh appeared to advise him to tell Hammond, their servant, to bring him some water too. Almost before Raleigh could speak, Hammond was there with his conspicuously new canvas bucket, his soap-box and toilet holdall, his razor and mug of shaving water. Ten minutes later, when Mason appeared on the dugout steps to announce that breakfast was ready, Raleigh felt so unlike the grubby, stiff, cold Raleigh of an hour earlier that he forgot his shyness and went down to his meal whistling.

Trotter, who came hard upon his heels, sniffed appreciatively. "What a lovely smell of bacon," he remarked. "There's nothing like a good fat rasher when you're as empty as I am."

Mason, who was just pouring out tea for Osborne, looked up with a broad smile of pleasure that someone appreciated his cooking, or at any rate, the odour of it.

"I'm glad you like it fat, sir."

Trotter hedged. "Well, I like a bit o' lean, too."

"There *was* a bit of lean in the middle of yours, sir, but it's kind of got shrunk up in the cooking."

"Bad cooking, that's all. Any porridge?"

Mason nodded.

"Lumpy, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Quite nice and lumpy."

"Then take the lumps out of mine. Use 'em for dumplings next time we 'ave boiled beef."

"And just bring you the gravy, sir? Very good, sir."

Trotter stared after the retreating servant, wondering whether he ought not to get angry.

"He's not a bad cook," put in Osborne soothingly.

"No," agreed Trotter. "Not so bad. Better than a bloke we 'ad when I was in the ranks. Used to be a plumber before the war. You ought to 'ave seen the stew 'e made. Thin! Thin wasn't the word. Fill a bath with it and pull the plug, and the whole lot would go in a couple of gurgles. Lucky for us one day 'e set 'imself on fire making the tea. 'E went 'ome pretty well fried. Did Mason get that pepper?"

Osborne nodded.

"Good. Must 'ave pepper. Hi! Mason!" he called. "Bacon!"

"Coming, sir!" And Mason arrived with some bacon on a tin plate—he preferred tin plates to any others because, as he put it, "they don't 'old the spots so."

"Ah," said Trotter, rubbing his hands together. "That looks all right. Not much lean about it, though."

"If you look straight down on it from above, sir, you can see it quite clear."

"Good Lord, yes!" agreed Trotter, with enthusiasm. "That's it, isn't it?"

"No, sir. That's a bit of rust off the pan. There it is, sir."

He pointed to the speck of lean with a finger which was so definitely grimy that he noticed it himself, and rubbed it vigorously on the seat of his breeches as he went back to his dugout to see what sort of a mess Hammond was making of the toast.

Trotter finished his bacon, rubbed his mouth thoroughly with a large khaki handkerchief, and turned to Raleigh with a smile.

"Well," he asked. "D'yer like it?"

"Oh, it's all right. It's much better after breakfast than before it. There's only this quiet that seems so funny."

"Ah," agreed Trotter reflectively. "It *is* quiet. It's much too quiet. Standing up there in the dark last night there didn't seem a thing in the world alive —except the rats squeaking and my stomach grumbling about that cutlet. You can bet your boots the Boche is up to something. The big attack soon, I reckon. I don't like it, Uncle. Pass the jam."

"It's strawberry," said Osborne, passing the sticky tin.

"Is it?" said Trotter, brightening up. "I'm glad we've got rid of that raspberry jam. Can't stand raspberries. Pips get be'ind your plate. Just time for a quick slice; then I'll go up to relieve Stanhope. My goodness, Uncle," he went on with sudden seriousness, "doesn't he look ill?"

"I'm afraid he's not well."

Raleigh's feeling of well-being, following on his shave, wash and hot drink, suddenly vanished. The fact that he had got through his first night in the line without incident ceased to give him satisfaction;

for there was still the mystery of Dennis, and the misery of finding him like that after his turn in the trenches with Trotter. He wished the other two would talk of something else—it seemed, somehow, disloyal to hear Dennis discussed. His platoon sergeant had given him a pile of letters and post-cards to be censored, and he began the hateful, mean duty of reading them to make sure they conveyed no military information. Whatever precautions were taken, the civilians in the back villages knew far more of the movements of troops, of the likelihood of attacks, than any infantryman, but the farce had to be kept up. Raleigh waded through the ill-spelt, pathetic letters, trying conscientiously to judge their possible value to the enemy, and to forget the sight of Dennis the night before, sitting on his bed drinking whisky.

"After you came up to relieve us," Trotter went on with steady persistence, "me and Raleigh came back here, and there was Stanhope sitting on 'is bed drinking. 'E was as white as a sheet. Awful, 'e looked, didn't he, Raleigh?"

"Did he?" said Osborne before Raleigh could speak. Then he went on hurriedly: "Look at the sun on those sandbags. It'll be quite warm soon."

"Yes," agreed Trotter, "and I'll get it 'ot if I don't go and relieve Stanhope. He'll curse like hell if I don't. Bet he's got a red-'ot liver this morning."

He rose slowly to his feet and exhaled deeply while he buttoned up his tunic.

"Lord!" he panted. "I must get me fat down."

Then having put on his helmet and gas-mask satchel, he muttered " Cheero ! " and disappeared up the steps.

Raleigh pushed his letters aside. He wanted to talk, but did not know how to begin. Things seemed so different after his one night in the line, and Osborne was the only man who would understand. The boy took a cigarette from his case and lighted it deliberately to give himself countenance.

" Well," said Osborne, as though he could read Raleigh's thought. " What do you think about it all ? "

" Oh, all right, thanks. But I feel I've been here for ages. And Trotter says we're here for six days. I just can't imagine what it's like at the end of them."

" Anyhow, we've done twelve hours already. It's fine when you're relieved and go down the line to billets, and have a good bath in a brewery tub or somewhere, and sit and read under trees."

" It must be," agreed Raleigh.

After those tragic, blackened stumps to the right of the trenches, it seemed almost impossible to believe that real trees, with leaves and branches, still existed. The splintered stumps had once formed a little larch wood, and, somewhere, other larch-trees would soon be covered with fresh, feathery green and the wood-pigeons would be building their untidy nests among their branches. Dennis could say all that sort of thing in words, but Raleigh only repeated his short sentence with lingering emphasis. " Yes, it must be ! "

" And how did you feel in the front line ? "

" Oh, all right. But it's funny to think of the Germans being so close. Only about seventy yards, isn't it ? "

" From the actual front line. Yes, about the breadth of a Rugger field."

The senior Rugger field at Barford had been away to the right, near the row of elm-trees. Along one side of it ran two rows of benches for the masters and their families, and the monitors. The smaller boys crowded the ropes along the other side of the field, some seventy yards away, and yelled enthusiastically : " Play up, Barford ! " " Oh, well run, Stanhope ! " " Oh, offside there ! " " Well collared, sir ! " until they were hoarse, and almost as tired as if they had been playing themselves. When that little worm, Lindsey, didn't cheer enough, he got scragged, or tripped up and rolled in the mud, so that Matron lost her hair with him when he came back to tea. . . . And the Germans were only the breadth of a Rugger field away.

" It's funny to think of it like that," mused Raleigh.

" I always measure distances like that out here. Keeps them in proportion."

" Did you play Rugger ? "

" Yes. But mostly reffing at school in the last few years."

" Why, are you a schoolmaster then ? "

Osborne laughed at the other's look of astonishment. " Yes," he admitted. " I must apologise."

" Oh, I don't mind schoolmasters." Then, red with confusion, he stumbled on, " I—I mean, I've never met one outside a school."

"They do get out sometimes."

"Who did you play for?"

"The Harlequins."

Raleigh whistled through his teeth. "I say, really!"

"I played for the English team on one great occasion."

"Whew! For England!"

"I was awfully lucky to get the chance. It's a long time ago now."

"But how simply topping! I—I never realised you'd played for England."

Osborne smiled to himself, and the fine little wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes. "Tuppence to talk to me now," he said. "Anyhow, don't breeze it about."

"Don't the others know? It'd make them feel jolly bucked."

"It doesn't make much difference out here."

"No," Raleigh agreed, trying again to adjust his values to this new standard. "I suppose it doesn't."

But he looked at Osborne with a new respect. The schoolmaster part of it was rather depressing, and it made one want to say "sir" again; but Osborne must have been a jolly good sort of schoolmaster to play Rugger for the Harlequins. And at the same time it was very flattering to think that he knew, while the others—even Dennis Stanhope—did not.

Voices were heard from the trench near the entrance to the dugout. Dennis was up there, and he'd be down in a moment for his breakfast. Raleigh stood up. "I started a letter when I came off duty

last night," he said. " I think I'll go and finish it now."

" Come and write it in here," Osborne urged in his friendly way. " It's more cheery."

" It's all right, thanks. I'm quite comfortable in there. I've rigged up a sort of little table beside my bed."

He disappeared as Stanhope, fresh from the March sunlight outside, groped his way down the steps into the dark dugout.

" What a foul smell of bacon," he commented.

" Yes, we've got bacon for breakfast."

" And the smell of it for the whole day. Where's Raleigh ? Have you told him about rifle inspection ?"

" In there. No, I didn't say anything about it."

Raleigh heard his name called, and returned to the main dugout.

" You inspect your platoon's rifles at nine o'clock," Stanhope told him curtly. " You needn't bother if the wood's a bit dirty ; but be careful about the barrels and magazines and all the metal parts."

" Righto, Stanhope," said Raleigh, and went back to his bed with its sagging wire netting. At the side of it a plank balanced on two ammunition boxes made a serviceable table, and above it was the biscuit tin, fixed upon wooden struts to the walls, which Trotter had helped to rig up for him when they came off duty the night before. This little corner of the dugout, with its sweating, clammy

walls, was his. The bookcase, the table, his three books, his chocolate, his peppermint creams, his block of writing paper in its soft leather case—these marked him out from all the thousands of other khaki-clad officers, helped him to retain his individuality, and, with it, his self-respect. By the wavering light of a candle he began to write his first letter home.

Stanhope, rejecting Mason's offer of bacon—even bacon with a decent proportion of lean to it—sat stirring his tea pensively.

"We've a lot of wiring to do," he said to Osborne at length. "I've arranged for two parties to begin at eight o'clock to-night—Corporal Burt with two men, and Sergeant Smith with two. I want them to strengthen the wire all along the front. Every company leaves it for the next one to do. There are great holes blown out weeks ago. Then next night we'll start putting a belt down both sides of us."

"What's that?" Osborne straightened up suddenly. "Down the sides?"

"Yes. We'll wire ourselves right in. If this attack comes, I'm not going to trust the companies on our sides to hold their ground. The Colonel's been round and he says a German prisoner gave the day of attack as the 21st."

"That's Thursday."

"Yes. To-day's Tuesday."

"That means about dawn the day after to-morrow. Then it'll come while we're here."

"Yes. It'll come while we're here. And we shall be in the front row of the stalls. The Colonel said

that when the trouble begins we can't expect any help from behind. We're not to move from here. We've got to stick it."

"I see," said Osborne. So that was the meaning of this silence which had impressed even Trotter and Hardy. They were going to get it "in the neck," as Hardy had put it. "I'm glad it's coming at last," he commented. "I'm sick of waiting."

The curtain of sacking which hung over the entrance to the servants' dugout bulged, and Mason appeared.

"Would you like a nice plate of sardines, sir?" he asked Stanhope.

"I should loathe it."

"Very good, sir"; and Mason returned to his dugout to supervise Hammond's washing-up of the other breakfast things.

"I told Trotter," Stanhope went on, "and all that worried him was that Friday's his birthday and parcels may get held up. Odd to feel like that. Must be rather nice to have no imagination."

"A bit dull, I should think."

"It must be, rather. I suppose all his life Trotter feels like you and I do when we're drowsily drunk."

"Poor chap!"

"I suppose if Trotter looks at that wall he just sees a brown surface. He doesn't see into the earth beyond—the worms wandering about round the stones and roots of trees. I wonder how a worm knows when it's going up or down?"

"When it's going down the blood runs into its head and makes it throb."

"Worms haven't got any blood."

"Then I don't suppose it ever does know," said Osborne conclusively.

"Rotten if it didn't, and went on going down when it thought it was coming up."

"Yes. I expect that's the one thing worms dread."

Stanhope looked at Osborne suddenly. "D'you think this life sharpens the imagination?"

Osborne nodded. "It must."

"Whenever I look at anything nowadays I see right through it. Looking at you now, there's your uniform—your jersey—shirt—vest—then beyond that——"

"Let's talk about something else," Osborne interrupted.

"Sorry," said Stanhope. "It's a habit that's grown on me lately to look right through things, and on and on, till I get frightened and stop. You—you don't think I'm going potty, do you?"

"Oh Lord, no!" Osborne reassured him.

Stanhope threw back his head and laughed.

"Dear Old Uncle! You don't really know, do you? You just pretend you do, to make me feel all right."

"When people are going potty," the other declared with a little of the schoolmaster in his manner, "they never talk about it. They keep it to themselves."

"Oh, well, that's all right then." Stanhope gave a little sigh of relief, which suggested that he had

been more serious than his tone would have led anyone, except perhaps Osborne, to believe. " Hi, Mason ! " he called. " Bring some mugs and a bottle of whisky."

" So early in the morning ? " put in Osborne.

" Just a spot. It's damned cold in here."

He took up an old magazine and began turning its pages.

" This show at the Hippodrome's been running a long time."

" What's that ? ' Ziz-Zag,' with George Robey ? "

" Yes. Harper saw it on leave. Says Robey's pricelessly funny in it. What did you see, Uncle, when you went on leave ? "

" I ? I saw nothing. I rather wish, now, that I had been to some show."

" D'you mean to say you never went to a single theatre ? "

" No. I spent all the time in the garden, making a rockery. In the evenings I used to sit and smoke and read, and my wife used to knit socks and play the piano a bit. We pretended there wasn't a war on at all—till my two youngsters made me help in a tin soldier battle on the floor. Mowed them down in fine style."

" Poor old Uncle ! You can't get away from it, can you ? Have a drink ? "

" Not now, thanks."

" You go on duty at eleven, don't you ? "

" Yes, I relieve Trotter."

" Raleigh had better go on duty at one o'clock and stay with you for an hour. Then he can stay on

alone till four, when Hibbert relieves him. What's he doing now ? "

" Raleigh ? Finishing a letter."

Stanhope's voice suddenly went hard. " Did you tell him ? "

" About what ? "

" Censorship."

" You don't mean that seriously ? "

" Mean it ? Of course I mean it ! "

" But, hang it all, you can't do that."

" Officially I'm supposed to read all your letters. Damn it all, Uncle ! Imagine yourself in my place . . . a letter going away from here . . . from that boy. . . . "

" He'll say nothing rotten about you."

" You think so ? " Stanhope paused, and then went on in a dead, even voice. " Last night when you'd gone on duty I got up to have a drink. I was feeling bad. I forgot Raleigh was out there with Trotter. I'd forgotten all about him. I just knew something beastly had happened. Then he came in, and looked at me. After coming in out of the night air, this place must have reeked of candle-grease, and rats, and whisky. One thing a boy like that can't stand is a smell that isn't fresh. He looked at me as if I'd hit him—as if I'd spat on him. . . ."

" You imagine things."

" Imagine things ! No need to. . . ."

He broke off as Raleigh came into the dugout, his letter in his hand. There was an awkward pause.

" Just going up to inspect rifles," said Raleigh

apologetically. " By the way, where do we put letters to be collected ? "

" Oh, just on the table," Osborne told him. " The quartermaster-sergeant takes them down when he brings up rations in the evening."

" Oh, thanks."

Raleigh was just about to stick the envelope down when Stanhope stopped him.

" You leave it open," he said quietly.

" Open ? But I—but I haven't said anything about where we are . . ."

" I have to censor all letters. It's the rule."

Raleigh looked down at his letter in perplexity and bewilderment. " I—I didn't realise that. I—I think—I'll just leave it then." He unbuttoned his tunic pocket to put the envelope away.

Stanhope rose and went across to him. " Give me that letter," he commanded.

" But—Dennis ! "

" Give me that letter," Stanhope repeated, and held out a trembling hand for it.

" But it's private. I didn't know . . ."

" D'you understand an order ? Give me that letter ! "

" But, I tell you, there's nothing . . ."

Stanhope clutched Raleigh's wrist and snatched the letter from him. His breath came in short gasps.

" Dennis, I'm . . ."

" Don't ' Dennis ' me ! Stanhope's my name. You're not at school. Go and inspect your rifles ! "

Osborne moved forward to intervene, but he realised that he could do no good. Raleigh stood in

uncertainty at the foot of the steps until Stanhope shouted at him :

" Don't you understand an order ? "

Raleigh stared at his company commander, said " Right " in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper, and went quietly up the steps. As soon as he was out of sight Stanhope relaxed to such an extent that he might have fallen had not Osborne found words of protest.

" Good heavens, Stanhope . . ." he began.

Stanhope turned on him furiously. " Look here, Osborne. *I*'m commanding this company. I ask for advice when I want it."

" Very well," said the other, and went back to his seat at the table. He carefully relit his pipe, which had gone out, while Stanhope sank down on his bed, staring stupidly at the letter. There was silence for a few moments, then he threw the letter on the table, and buried his face in his hands.

" Oh, God ! " he muttered. " I don't want to read the blasted thing ! "

" You'll let it go then ? "

" I don't care."

Osborne smoked reflectively. Then he picked up the envelope. He looked at Stanhope, sitting huddled up with his face hidden. And he made a suggestion. " Shall I glance through it for you ? " he asked.

" If you like."

" I don't want to."

" You'd better. I can't."

Osborne took the folded sheets out of the envelope.

After a while he turned towards Stanhope. " D'you want to hear ? "

" I suppose I'd better know."

" He begins with a description of his getting here. No places mentioned. All straightforward stuff. Just the last piece is about you."

" Go on," urged Stanhope impatiently.

Osborne took up the letter and read the last page aloud. " He says : ' And now I come to the great news. I reported at battalion headquarters, and the Colonel looked in a little book, and said " You report to ' C ' Company—Captain Stanhope." Can't you imagine what I felt ? I was taken along some trenches and shown a dugout. There was an awfully nice officer there—quite old—with grey hair—and then later Dennis came in. He looked tired, but that's because he works so frightfully hard, and because of the responsibility. Then I went on duty in the front line, and a sergeant told me all about Dennis. He said that Dennis is the finest officer in the battalion, and the men simply love him. He hardly ever sleeps in the dugout ; he's always up in the front line with the men, cheering them on with jokes, and making them keen about things, like he did the kids at school. I'm awfully proud to think he's my friend.'

" That's all," Osborne concluded. " Shall I stick it down ? "

Stanhope still did not move. He kept his face hidden, but he muttered " Yes, please," through his fingers. Osborne licked the gum on the envelope and carefully closed it. Then he went across to his bed, and pretended that he was going to have a short sleep.

Mason peeped through the curtains to ask some question about the menu for the midday meal, but drew back unnoticed, and he said nothing to Hammond or the signallers to suggest that anything out of the ordinary had happened in the officers' dugout.

CHAPTER XX

Stanhope was writing one of the innumerable reports which found their way to some clip or spike at Brigade headquarters when the Colonel came down the steps into the dugout. It was not often that one saw him twice in the space of a few hours and Stanhope immediately had an uneasy feeling that something was wrong. The Colonel's first words confirmed it.

" I'm glad you are alone," he said, " I've got some rather serious news."

" I'm sorry to hear that, sir. Will you have a drink ? "

The Colonel accepted the one china mug with a moderate dose of whisky in it. Unlike Stanhope, he added a little water out of the earthenware jar which stood on the table. " Here's luck," he said, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Stanhope pulled forward a box to sit upon and awaited the Colonel's news.

" Since I saw you this morning the Brigadier's been to see me. As I told you, it's almost certain that the attack's to come on Thursday morning. They've got information from more than one source, but they don't know where it's going to fall the hardest. The Boche began relieving his front line troops yesterday and they are bound to put in certain regiments where

they intend to make the hardest push "—the Colonel spoke slowly, as though he had been trying to postpone giving the message. Then at last he blurted out : " The General wants us to make a raid to find out who has come into the line opposite us here."

" I see," said Stanhope, after a pause, " When ? "

" As soon as possible. He said to-night."

" Oh, but that's absurd," protested Stanhope.

" I told him so," agreed the Colonel a little wearily. " I said the earliest would be to-morrow afternoon ; a surprise daylight raid under a smoke-screen from the trench mortar people. I think daylight best. There's not much of a moon now, and it's vitally important to get hold of a Boche or two. Two officers and ten men ought to be quite enough for the purpose. There's only seventy yards of No Man's Land. To-night the trench mortars can blow a hole in the Boche wire and you can cut a hole in yours. Harrison, of the trench mortars, is coming in to dinner with me this evening to discuss everything. I'd like you to come too—eight o'clock suit you ? "

" Very good, sir."

" I leave you to select the men."

" Do you want me to go with them, sir ? "

" Oh, no, Stanhope," protested the Colonel. I—I can't let you go. I want one officer to direct the raid and one to make the dash in to collar some Boche."

" Whom do you suggest, sir ? " asked Stanhope quietly.

" Well, I suggest Osborne for one. He's a very level-headed chap. He can direct it."

" And who else ? "

The Colonel hesitated. " Well, there's Trotter," he said doubtfully, " but he's a bit fat, isn't he ? Not much good at dashing in."

Stanhope nodded agreement. " What about Hibbert ? " he asked.

" What do *you* think of Hibbert ? " asked the Colonel, hesitating to express his own opinion.

Stanhope shook his head slowly. " I don't think he's the man," he said. " Why not send a good sergeant, sir ? "

" No, I don't think a sergeant. The men expect officers to lead a raid. As a matter of fact, Stanhope, I'm thinking of that youngster I sent up to you last night."

So it had to be Jimmy. There wasn't any way out of it.

" He's just the type," the Colonel went on, " plenty of guts."

" He's awfully new to it all," suggested Stanhope.

" All to the good. His nerves are sound."

" It's rotten sending a fellow who's only just arrived."

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders a little impatiently. " Well, who else is there ? " he asked. " I could send an officer from another company of course . . . "

" Oh, Lord, no," interrupted Stanhope ; " we'll do it."

The Colonel breathed a little sigh of relief. " Then I suggest Osborne to direct the raid and Raleigh to make the dash with ten men. You select the men and

talk to Osborne and Raleigh about it in the meantime. It's a damned nuisance, but, after all, it's necessary." He rose to go, but at the foot of the dugout steps he turned. " Well, so long, Stanhope. I'll see you at eight o'clock. Do you like fish ? "

" Fish, sir ? " said Stanhope, who was still thinking of the raid.

" Yes, we've had some fresh fish sent up from railhead for supper to-night."

" Splendid, sir," said Stanhope, lost in thought.

After the Colonel had gone, Stanhope walked slowly up and down the dugout, his hands clasped behind his back.

This raid made all the difference. How the devil was he to break the news to Jimmy, a kid who had not yet been twenty-four hours under fire ? And this wretched business of the letter was all the worse now. He ought to go and apologise—he would do if he saw Jimmy alone. But one never did get any privacy in the dugout, and he was not going to hunt him out. There'd be time enough to eat humble pie. Besides, he'd got other things to think about, what with all the arrangements for the raid as well as for the German attack on Thursday morning. Yes, the Raleigh business would have to wait until chance brought them together when nobody else was about.

In the neighbouring dugout Hibbert was fighting out a battle of his own. He had turned in for a sleep after lunch, while Trotter was out with a working party repairing the communication trench. Nobody had said anything to him about the German attack, but everyone seemed to expect it in a day or two, and

he could hardly hope any more that the battalion would be resting out of the line when it came. He'd had three months of this now, each day getting worse. There was no way, at least no decent way, out of it except if you were wounded, and he had always feared physical pain much more than other fellows. He could not sleep, and he could not read, so he lay on his bed thinking it over until he recognised the Colonel's voice in the next dugout. He sat up on his bed and listened.

So there was to be a raid on the German trenches. Hibbert's heart beat irregularly. Suppose he were selected to go on it ! How could he ever get across No Man's Land, with the members of the raiding party dependent upon him ? They couldn't, they mustn't, choose him. He heard his own name mentioned.

" What do *you* think of Hibbert ? " said the Colonel, and, after a pause, came Stanhope's reply. " I don't think he's the man."

The deep relief that he was not to go was marred by an overwhelming shame. Stanhope didn't think he was the man ! He *had* tried hard during those three months, and all to no purpose. It was almost a disappointment that Raleigh, and not he, would take part in the raid. What would everyone think about it—the men, Osborne, Raleigh himself? There wasn't any point in trying any more. He'd had enough of it. The Colonel had gone, and the other dugout was in silence. He'd go and talk to Stanhope. He packed his things feverishly, and went through the tunnel.

Stanhope greeted him without enthusiasm.

"Hello," he said, "I thought you were asleep. What d'you want?"

"It's this neuralgia of mine. I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I can't stick it any longer."

That slightly whining voice always annoyed Stanhope.

"I know, it's rotten, isn't it?" he agreed curtly. "I've got it like hell. . . ."

"You have?" asked Hibbert, taken aback.

"Had it for weeks."

"I'm sorry," said Hibbert, and then went back to his point. "It's no good, I've tried damned hard, but I can't stick it any longer. I must go down."

"Go down? Where?"

"Go sick. Go down the line. I must get into hospital and get some sort of treatment. I think I had better go right along now." He turned back towards his own dugout.

"You are going to stay here," said Stanhope quietly.

"I'm going down to see the doctor," Hibbert insisted in his dreamy way. "He'll send me to hospital when he understands."

"You are going to stay here," Stanhope said. "I've seen the doctor, and had a talk with him this morning. He won't send you to hospital. He'll send you back here. He promised me he would, so you can save yourself a walk."

"What the hell . . ." Hibbert began, but Stanhope interrupted him.

"Stop that," he ordered.

"I've a perfect right to go sick if I want to," Hibbert protested. "The men can, why can't an officer?"

"No man's sent down unless he's very ill. There's nothing wrong with you, Hibbert. The German attack's almost certain for Thursday. I suppose you've heard. You are going to stay here and see it through with the rest of us."

"I tell you I *can't*," protested Hibbert hysterically. "The pain's nearly sending me mad. I'm going. I've got all my stuff packed, and I'm going now. *You* can't stop me." He hurried excitedly into his own dugout while Stanhope walked slowly towards the steps, turned, and undid the flap of his revolver holster. He took out his revolver and was examining it casually when Hibbert returned, with his pack slung on his shoulder and his walking-stick in his hand. He tried to edge between Stanhope and the wall in order to reach the dugout steps, but there was not quite room. "Let's go by, Stanhope," he said.

"You are going to stay here and do your job."

"Haven't I told you I can't? Don't you understand? Let me get by."

Stanhope looked up as though he had reached a sudden decision. "Now, look here, Hibbert," he said, "I've got a lot of work to do and no time to waste. Once and for all, you are going to stay here and see it through with the rest of us."

"I shall die of this pain if I don't go."

"Better die of the pain than be shot for deserting."

"What do you mean?" asked the other in a low voice.

"You know what I mean."

"If you only knew how awful I feel," pleaded Hibbert. "Please do let me go by." But since Stanhope did not move he tried once again to edge past him.

Stanhope slipped his revolver into the holster and thrust the other back roughly. In a second Hibbert raised his stick and struck blindly at this man who would not let him pass. Stanhope just had time to ward off the blow. He snatched the stick out of Hibbert's hand, smashed it across his knee and threw the pieces to the ground.

"My God!—You little swine," he cried. "You know what that means, don't you, striking a superior officer?"

Hibbert stared at the other as though he did not understand what he was saying. He began to stammer something, and then broke down altogether.

"Stanhope, I've tried like hell. I swear I have!" he sobbed. "Ever since I came out here I've hated and loathed it. Every sound up there makes me all cold and sick. I'm different to the others. They—you—don't understand. It's got worse and worse, and now I can't bear it any longer. I'll never go up those steps again into the line, with the men looking at me, and knowing. I'd rather die here. I'd rather you shot me for trying to desert. . . ."

Stanhope poured some whisky into a mug.

"Try a drop of this," he said in a friendly voice.

"No, thanks."

"Go on. Drink it. I know what you feel," he went

on when Hibbert had swallowed the spirit. "I've known all along. . . ."

"How *can* you know?" Hibbert interrupted.

"Because I feel the same—exactly the same! Every little noise up there makes me feel just as you feel. Why didn't you tell me instead of talking about neuralgia? We all feel like you do sometimes, if you only knew. I hate and loathe it all. Sometimes I feel I could just lie down on this bed and pretend I was paralysed or something, and couldn't move, and just lie there till I died—or was dragged away."

"I can't bear to go up into those awful trenches again," Hibbert persisted.

"When are you due to go on?"

"Quite soon. At four."

"Shall we go on together? We know how we both feel now. Shall we see if we can stick it together?"

"I can't. . . ."

"Supposing I said I can't—supposing we *all* say we can't—what would happen then?"

"I don't care. What's it matter? It's all so beastly. Nothing matters."

"Supposing the worst happened," Stanhope went on soothingly. "Supposing we were knocked right out. Think of all the chaps who've gone already. It can't be very lonely there, with all those fellows. Sometimes I think it's lonelier here."

Hibbert was sitting quietly now, his eyes roving vacantly in front of him.

"Just go and have a bit of a rest. Then we'll go out together."

"Do please let me go, Stanhope."

" If you went, and left Osborne and Trotter and Raleigh and all those men up there to do your work, could you ever look a man straight in the face again —in all your life ? You may be wounded. Then you can go home and feel proud. And if you are killed you—you won't have to stand this hell any more. You've a straight, fighting chance of coming through. Take the chance, old chap. Don't you think it's worth standing in with men like Osborne and Trotter and Raleigh when they all feel like you do —in their hearts—and just go on sticking to it because they know it's the only thing a decent man can do. What about it ? " he concluded after a pause.

" I'll—I'll try."

" Good man."

" You—you won't say anything, Stanhope, about this ? "

" If you promise not to tell anyone what a blasted funk *I* am."

" No," agreed Hibbert, with a little, nervous laugh.

" Splendid ! " said Stanhope. " Now go and have ten minutes' rest and a smoke. Then we'll go up together and hold each other's hands, and jump every time a rat squeaks. We've all got a good fighting chance. *I* mean to come through, don't you ? "

Hibbert got to his feet and blew his nose.

" Yes, rather," he agreed. He paused at the entrance to his own dugout. " It's awfully decent of you, Stanhope," he said timidly.

" That's all right." Stanhope poured out a tot of whisky, and sat down at the table to write. Before

he had got beyond "From O.C. 'C' Company" in his message book, Mason came and stood confidentially at his elbow.

"Will you have a nice cup of tea, sir?"

"Can you guarantee it's nice?"

"Well, sir, it's a bit oniony, but that's only because of the saucepan."

"In other words, it's onion soup with tea-leaves in it?"

"Not till dinner-time, sir."

"All right, Mason. Bring two cups of onion tea. One for Mr. Hibbert."

"Very good, sir." As he went towards the door, he met Osborne coming down the steps. "Will you have a nice cup of tea, sir?"

"Please, Mason, and plenty of bread and butter and strawberry jam."

He turned to explain how things were going up in the front line, but Stanhope was too preoccupied to pay much attention.

"The Colonel's been talking to me again," he said at length.

"About the attack?"

"Partly. We've got to make a raid, Uncle."

Osborne's voice went down a note or two. "Oh, when?" he asked.

"To-morrow afternoon. Under a smoke screen. Two officers and ten men."

"Who's going?"

"You and Raleigh."

"Oh," said Osborne after pause. There was another short silence before he asked: "Why Raleigh?"

"The Colonel picked you to direct, and Raleigh to dash in."

"I see."

"The Brigade wants to know who's opposite here."

"To-morrow? What time?"

"I suggest about five o'clock. A little before dusk."

"I see."

"I'm damned sorry."

"That's all right, old chap."

They discussed the details of the raid, and the chances that the trench mortars would cut decent gaps in the German wire, until Mason arrived with the tea. He took one cup in to Hibbert and left three on the table. In a minute or two Trotter turned up, rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, Lord, I do feel frowsy. 'Ad a fine sleep, though."

Osborne had taken a small leather-bound book from his pocket and had begun to read. Stanhope gulped down his tea, and went up to the trench to ask for volunteers for the next afternoon. Trotter squatted down and helped himself generously to jam.

> "Tell me, Mother, what is that
> That looks like strawberry jam?"

he recited,

> "Hush, hush, my dear; 'tis only Pa
> Run over by a tram."

Osborne lowered his book. "The Colonel came while you were asleep," he said. "We've got to make a raid to-morrow afternoon."

"Oh, Lord. What, all of us?" Why couldn't these blokes on the Staff leave one alone. Wasn't it enough that they had the German attack looming on the horizon? "Who's going?" he went on.

"Raleigh and I."

"Raleigh? But 'e's only just come!"

"Apparently that's the reason."

"And you're going too?"

Osborne nodded.

"Let's 'ear all about it."

"I know very little yet, except that it's got to be done."

"What a damned nuisance." There was real sympathy in Trotter's voice.

"It is rather."

"I reckon the Boche are all ready waiting for it. Did you 'ear about the raid just south of 'ere the other night?"

"Nothing much."

"The trench mortars go and knock an 'ole in the Boche wire to let our fellers through—and in the night the Boche went out and tied bits of red rag on each side of the 'ole."

"Yes. I heard about that."

"And even then our fellers 'ad to make the raid. It was murder. Doesn't this tea taste of onions?"

"It does a bit."

He told Mason so when he brought in another plate of bread.

" I'm sorry, sir," said Mason. " Onions do 'ave a way of cropping up again."

" Yes, but we 'aven't 'ad onions for days."

" I know, sir. That's what makes it so funny."

" Well, you better do something about it."

" I'll look into it, sir."

" Joking apart," Trotter went on to Osborne when Mason had gone, " it's damned ridiculous making a raid when the Boche are expecting it."

" We're not doing it for fun."

" I know."

" You might avoid talking to Raleigh about it."

" Why ? " asked Trotter. " How do you mean ? "

" There's no need to tell him it's murder."

" Oh, Lord ! No," agreed Trotter, assuming a diplomatic air. " I'm sorry 'e's got to go, though. 'E's a nice young fellow. What are you reading ? " he went on, seeing that Osborne had taken up his book again.

" Oh, just a book."

" What's it called ? "

Osborne held the book across the table so that Trotter could read the title. " Ever read it ? " he asked.

" *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—why, that's a kid's book ! "

" Yes."

" You aren't *reading* it ? "

" Yes."

" What—a *kid's* book ? "

" Haven't you read it ? "

" No," declared Trotter scornfully.

"You ought to. Listen :

"How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale ?

"How cheerfully he seems to grin
And neatly spread his claws,
And welcomes little fishes in
With gently smiling jaws ! "

"I don't see no point in that ! " commented Trotter, after a reflective pause.

"Exactly," agreed Osborne. "That's just the point."

Trotter looked curiously at Osborne. "You *are* a funny chap."

Osborne was spared the necessity of replying by the return of Stanhope.

"Sorry to 'ear about the raid, skipper," said Trotter.

"So am I. What d'you make the time ? "

"Just on four."

"Was Hibbert asleep when you came out of there ? "

"No. 'E was just laying on 'is bed, smoking."

"Hibbert ! " called Stanhope.

"I'm ready, Stanhope." Hibbert appeared, ready to go on duty.

"Had some tea ? "

"Yes, thanks."

"I shall be up there some time, Uncle," said Stanhope.

"I say," Osborne protested, "why don't you have a rest ? You've been on the go all day."

"There's too much to do. We'll have to send a party down to the dump for wire—I'm afraid you'll have to go with them, Uncle—and then I'll have to alter arrangements for the wiring party. Can't have the men out in front of the trench while the toc-emmas are blowing gaps in the Boche wire. Ready, Hibbert? Come on, my lad."

Trotter watched them with curiosity as they went up the steps. "Can't understand that little feller, can you?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Why, 'Ibbert. D'you see 'is eyes? All red. 'E told me in there 'e'd got 'ay-fever."

"Rotten thing, hay-fever."

"If you ask me, 'e's been crying."

Osborne had given up his attempt to read, and had begun to write a letter. He gave a non-committal grunt in reply.

"Funny little bloke, isn't 'e?"

"Yes. I say, d'you mind? I just want to get a letter off."

"Oh, sorry," said Trotter contritely. "They 'aven't collected letters yet, then?"

"Not yet."

"I'll get one off to my old lady." Trotter rose and walked towards his dugout. "She's wrote and asked if I've got fleas."

"And have you?"

The other rubbed his back gently against the beam which supported the dugout roof. "I wish it *was* fleas!"

Osborne laughed, and went on with his letter.

Presently he raised his head sharply. Someone was running down the dugout steps, and such haste generally indicated bad news. It was Raleigh.

"I say," he burst out excitedly, "Stanhope came with Hibbert to relieve me, and he's told me about the raid."

"Has he?"

"Just you and me, isn't it, and ten men?"

"Yes, to-morrow. Just before dusk, under a smoke cloud."

"I say—it's most frightfully exciting!"

"We shall know more about it after Stanhope sees the Colonel to-night."

"Were you and I picked specially?"

"Yes."

"I say!"

Osborne did not speak, but he looked at Raleigh with a queer expression of pity before he turned back to his letter.

CHAPTER XXI

As they sat over their coffee after lunch Raleigh, trying to conceal his hand under the table, glanced at his wrist-watch. Neither Hibbert nor Trotter noticed his action, and even had they done so they would not have connected it in any way with the forthcoming raid—since one was far too introspective, too taken up with his own troubles, and the other was far too little given to reflection of any sort. But Osborne saw and smiled slightly in an understanding way, which made Raleigh more thankful than ever that they had been chosen to do the job together. It must be rather rotten for Osborne, though, because he was middle-aged, had a family, and all that sort of thing. It was like asking a man who'd settled down to a life of comfortable idleness, and who hadn't touched a Rugger ball for years, to turn out and play three-quarter in a particularly stiff match. Of course there had been sporting masters at Barford—they had all joined up near the beginning of the war—but somehow Raleigh found it difficult to picture them waiting to do a raid on the German lines. And Osborne—Uncle—took it all so calmly. Thank Heaven he did, too, because there wasn't any risk of his losing his head when the time came. It was all very much like waiting to be summoned down to the Head's study to be whacked

after you'd been caught picking apples, or going out of bounds, or purposely blowing things up in the chemical lab. ; and what was so odd about it was that, having reached the dignity of a monitor, he'd imagined he had escaped from that feeling for good and all.

He went back to his own dugout with a rather deliberately nonchalant walk, and lay down on the wire netting which clung precariously to its wooden frame and kept him above the level of the floor. It would be too theatrical to write to his father and Madge in case anything went wrong. Besides, after that awful business with Dennis yesterday, he wasn't so keen on writing letters. What on earth could the trouble have been about ? If only he could get hold of Dennis for a moment he was sure he could clear up the misunderstanding—because it *could* only be a misunderstanding ; he realised that all right. But Dennis was so busy with all this business of wiring the trenches properly, with all his arrangements in the event of an attack, and with the preparations for the raid.

Back to the raid again. Funny how one could not get it out of one's mind. He began going through his instructions, to make quite sure that when the time came he wouldn't make a mess of things. In a way he was lucky to have so responsible a job thrust on to his shoulders when he had only just come out. Odd, though, that they hadn't chosen Hibbert !

Osborne drank up his coffee with a little grimace, knocked out the ashes of his pipe against his big,

muddy boot, and, though he was not on duty, strolled up to the trenches. A little beyond the dugout was a half-made trench which, for some reason best known to the people higher up, had been abandoned. Near the end it became quite shallow, but a low mound of earth made it fairly safe from observation, and Osborne was able to sit on the edge of what would have been a parapet, turn his back to the war, and gaze westwards towards country—beyond the range of his vision, alas—that had escaped devastation. It was a beautiful afternoon, and there was a clean freshness in the air which made him look round for signs of spring. There had once been a wood here, but this year few trees would burst into leaf, for there was not one of them which had not been smashed and splintered by shell-fire. And, even so, branches which had not been entirely severed from the parent trunk had begun here and there to show little, despairing, green buds. Defiant blades of grass were struggling up through the earth, blackened or discoloured by the chemicals which men had discovered for use in the struggle of mutual destruction. Even here, where hope was folly, spring would fill men's hearts with new hope.

Osborne took out his pipe, but hesitated as he was about to fill it, and then put his tobacco-pouch back into his pocket. Although he seemed to be quite safe here, there was no point in advertising his presence by sending wisps of blue smoke floating upwards in the still air, like smoke from cottage-chimneys in the peace of an autumn afternoon.

Whatever was to happen, Osborne told himself,

he had a lot to be thankful for. This empty pipe, its bowl burnt and blackened, and its stem almost bitten through, had been his companion through so many happy hours—on walking tours in Devonshire, the Chilterns, and the New Forest ; while he was fishing with a fly in some cheerful, hurrying, noisy mountain stream, or with a worm and float in the lazy reaches of some river winding its slow way through fields thick with bulrushes or meadowsweet. Even at home on the verandah, the task of correcting large piles of exercise books had been mitigated by this pipe and the homely sounds around him—the clattering of the cups and saucers in the kitchen, for Ethel had never learned to curb her boisterous spirits when she dealt with china ; the noise of fellows on the playing-field, remote enough to be pleasant ; the splashing from the bathroom above, where Joan was supervising the scrubbing of the children, tired and dirty from a busy day picking blackberries or flowers along the hedges and on the Common. Joan had complained often enough of the pipe, but then no woman ever understood the value of a pipe or a walking-stick, or even an old, rough country suit.

No, whatever happened, he had nothing much to grumble about. He had not been ambitious enough to look upon the world in a possessive, greedy way. There were Joan, the children, memories of Rugger matches, days in the country, talks with friends over a winter fire, occasional flashes of satisfaction when he felt that he had given real and lasting help to some boy at school, and now this great experience

of war. He had lived more fully during these few months than ever before, and, if he hated the dirt and brutality of it all as much as—more than—those other, younger men, upon whose minds it would engrave a shallower impression, he was also grateful for what it had shown him of courage, self-sacrifice, and the essential kindliness of men. These qualities had existed, of course, in the old days, but only a catastrophe could bring them thus clearly to the surface. He felt no fear of what the raid might bring to him—only a profound hope, almost a prayer, that he would be left alive in a world where there were so many lovely things.

But what about Joan and the two boys? How would they manage? He had put aside very little money during these years of building up his school, and the goodwill of the place would not be worth much in this age of uncertainty. Would Joan feel about it in the same way as he had, and not be too resentful and embittered if he did not come back? So many women found almost hysterical comfort in the thought that their sons or husbands had died while fighting for their country. But she was too clear-headed to be consoled by this manifestation of mob psychology. But if she knew, if he had been able to convey to her on his last leave how he himself felt about it, it would be all right. There was a job to be done—it ought never to have arisen and it should never be allowed to arise again, but that was not the point at the moment; that would be for the survivors to wrangle about—there was a job to be done, and there was a deep satisfaction to be got out of it.

It was a tragic job, but less so for him, who had had so much out of life, than for all these youngsters who did not even realise how unlucky they were, so new were they to existence.

His thoughts turned to his own two boys. They would miss him in so many ways, but perhaps they would feel it most of all when he no longer came into their room early in the morning to read to them. *The Water Babies* and *Alice in Wonderland* had given place to the books of Fenimore Cooper and Ballantyne, which, in turn, had been ousted by those of Dickens and Scott. When he was last on leave he had found Winwood Reade's *Martyrdom of Man* in John's room, but he could not talk it over with him since John had been away at school. Dick would have difficulty in making his bows and arrows and in repairing his clockwork train, but, thank Heaven, they were both young enough to forget easily, and the idea that their father had been a soldier would make it all right for them. If only in some way he could keep in touch with them, follow their development, see to what degree the ideas Joan and he had passed on to them bore fruit, then it would not be so bad. It was perhaps the only ambition in him which was strong enough to hurt. " Old stick-in-the-mud " Joan had sometimes called him in an affectionate tone which turned the insult into a compliment ; but now she too was growing middle-aged, and was happy to sit by the fire of an evening with a book or some work. She, too, was living in the future, staking everything on the boys' careers.

Osborne pulled his writing-pad out of his pocket

and scribbled a note to her in which he tried to explain it all. Amongst the tufts of discoloured grass was a small scarlet pimpernel, and, with a complete lack of theatricality, he picked it and placed it between the sheets of his letter. Then he got to his feet, and, with a last glance back at this little refuge, he returned to the front line to see if in any way he could relieve Stanhope of some of his burden of work.

He found Raleigh up there, studying No Man's Land through a periscope with a slightly exaggerated care, as though he were trying to cheat time by appearing to be very busy. Every member of the raiding party knew exactly where the gaps in the British wire were, and guiding tapes had been laid during the night so that they could find the one hole which the trench mortars had succeeded in blowing in the German entanglements. Trotter, his usually contented face creased with worry, came to point out two little strips of red ribbon which fluttered, one on each side of this gap.

"It's jest as I thought," he spluttered. "Sheer bloomin' murder!"

But he checked himself as Osborne nodded towards Raleigh.

"Still, it's all right if you keeps upright," he went on rather lamely, "because, if you do get it, you get it in the leg, and that means Blighty."

Osborne pictured to himself all the German machine-guns that would be trained on that one gap through which the raiding party must pass. He said nothing, but he prayed that, in view of this

flaunting proof that the Germans were ready and waiting, the raid might be cancelled or postponed.

Down in the dugout Stanhope was arguing in favour of postponement with the Colonel. "Didn't you suggest to the Brigadier that we should alter our plans," he asked, "and make a surprise raid farther up the line after dark?"

"Yes, I suggested that, but he said the present arrangements have got to stand."

"But, surely he must realise——?"

The Colonel broke in impatiently. "Look here, Stanhope, I've done all I can, but my report's got to be at headquarters by seven this evening. If we wait till it's dark we shall be too late."

"Why seven?"

"They've got some conference to arrange the placing of reserves."

Stanhope laughed bitterly. "They can't have it later because of dinner, I suppose." After all, what could leisured but fussy old gentlemen in some *château* miles behind the trenches realise of the agony of mind of some poor devil who had to make a raid through a gap in the barbed-wire, upon which, as he knew, the Germans had trained a dozen machine-guns, waiting till the moment came to press the button? They weren't fighting the same war, the infantry and these old portly generals; it wasn't fair to expect mutual understanding. But the Colonel, he knew what it meant to the infantryman. Why hadn't he made more of a fuss to get the show cancelled or postponed?

"Lots of raids have taken place along the line to-day," the Colonel went on in an attempt to answer Stanhope's unspoken questions. "With the attack to-morrow morning, headquarters naturally want all the information they can get as early as possible. That's why they wouldn't look at my proposal to wait until after dark. And I can't disobey orders."

Stanhope suddenly felt sorry for the Colonel. After all, what had he been but a decent little country squire, with a smallish but very pleasant sixteenth-century manor-house—he carried photographs of it about with him because he was fond, rather than proud, of it—and few responsibilities beyond the educating of a son and a daughter and the upkeep of a few farms and cottages. At considerable expense he had put the educational responsibility on to the shoulders of others, whose verdicts he accepted unquestioningly, since they were specialists and he was only a plain man. As for the villagers, a few shillings went a long way in repairs, and the rector could do a great deal to make people satisfied with their modest fate if he was invited up from time to time to dine at the Manor, where he appreciated the burgundy and the port, or was presented every now and then with a cut of salmon or a brace of pheasants. And, because he had felt it both patriotic and pleasant to join the Territorials, he was suddenly thrust in command of nearly a thousand men in constant danger of their lives, and under the orders of an overwhelming hierarchy of Staff officers who seldom let him forget, when he tried to stand up for himself,

that he was not really one of them, being only a "Terrier." Stanhope, realising all this with the quickened imagination that had become his during the last few months, felt sorry for the Colonel, but he could not leave the subject.

"Why didn't the trench mortars blow a dozen holes in different places," he asked, "so the Boche wouldn't know which one we were going to use?"

It was only because the Colonel sympathised with Stanhope that he kept his temper. "It took three hours to blow that one. How could they blow a dozen in the time? It's no good worrying about all that now. It's too late."

Stanhope said nothing.

"It's no good getting depressed," the Colonel went on. "After all, it's only sixty yards, and the smoke ought to blow across nicely. The wind's just right. I called on the trench mortars on the way up. They'll drop the bombs thirty yards to the right. The Boche'll be firing into a blank fog. Osborne's a cool, level-headed chap, and Raleigh's the very man to dash in."

Mason came hesitatingly into the dugout, and hovered around respectfully in the background until Stanhope turned questioningly towards him.

"Please, sir," he announced, "the coffee's ready. 'Ot and strong, sir, same as you said."

Stanhope arranged for an orderly to fetch Osborne and Raleigh, and resumed his talk with the Colonel. "We've picked good men to follow them," he said. "All youngsters. Strong, keen chaps."

"Good!" approved the Colonel. Then, after a pause, he continued: "You know quite well I'd give anything to cancel the beastly affair."

"I know you would, sir."

"Have those red rags on the wire upset the men at all?"

"It's hard to tell. They naturally take it as a joke. They say the rags are just what they want to show them the way through the gap."

"That's the spirit, Stanhope." He turned quite optimistically towards Osborne and Raleigh as they came down the steps. "Well, Osborne, everything ready?" he asked.

"Yes, I think we're all ready, sir. I make it just a quarter to. The men are going to stand by at three minutes to."

"That's right. The smoke-bombs drop exactly on the hour. You'll give the word to go when the smoke's thick enough."

"That's right, sir."

Mason, summoned by Stanhope, brought in two cups of strong coffee, made from liquid in a bottle.

"Were the men having their rum, Uncle?" asked Stanhope.

"Yes. Just as we left. It gives it a quarter of an hour to soak in."

"That's right," said the Colonel. "Are they cheerful?"

"Yes, quite."

"Would you like to go up and speak to them, sir?" Stanhope suggested.

"Well, don't you think they'd rather be left alone?"

"I think they would appreciate a word or two," Stanhope assured him.

"All right. If you think they would. Will you come too?"

"Yes, I'll come, sir."

The Colonel lingered a moment, wondering what to say. When the pause began to be awkward, he cleared his throat and held out his hand.

"Well, good luck, Osborne. I'm certain you'll put up a good show."

"Thank you, sir."

"And you, Raleigh, just go in like blazes. Grab hold of the first Boche you see and bundle him across here. One'll do, but bring more if you see any handy."

"Right, sir." And the two shook hands.

"If you succeed," went on the Colonel, "I'll recommend you both for the M.C. And, remember, a great deal may depend on bringing in a German. It may mean the winning of the whole war. You never know." There was another pause, during which Raleigh found himself thinking of the Head's talk to the shooting eight on the eve of its departure for the Public Schools competition at Bisley. "Well, good luck to you both," he ended, as he turned with almost undignified haste towards the steps.

"By the way," he called over his shoulder, "don't forget to empty your pockets of papers and things."

"Oh, no." Raleigh went to his own dugout to

empty his belongings on to his bed. Osborne stopped Stanhope as he was about to follow the Colonel.

" Don't think I'm being morbid, or anything like that," he said in a voice which was a trifle too casual to be absolutely natural, " but would you mind taking these ? " He took his watch and the letter he had just written from his pocket, and pulled a gold signet-ring from his finger.

" Sure," said Stanhope. " Until you come back, old man."

" It's only just in case. If anything *should* happen you might send them along to my wife."

" Right ! " Stanhope put them together on the table. " You're coming back, though. Damn it ! what on earth should I do without you ? "

" Goodness knows ! " laughed Osborne.

" Must have somebody to tuck me up in bed. Well, I'll see you up in the sap before you go. Just have a spot of rum in that coffee. Cheero ! "

" Cheero ! " replied Osborne. He filled his pipe slowly, and was lighting it over the candle when Raleigh returned.

" Just time for one small pipe," he said.

" Good ! I'll have a cigarette, I think." He groped in his pocket, and remembered he had left his case, with his other precious belongings, on his bed.

Osborne offered his case. " Here you are, have one of mine."

" I say. I'm always smoking yours."

" That's all right. What about this coffee ? "

" Sure." They both sat down at the table.

"Are you going to have a drop of rum in it?" asked Osborne.

Raleigh hesitated. "Don't you think it might make us a—a bit muzzy?" he asked.

"I'm just having the coffee as it is."

"I think I will too."

"We'll have the rum afterwards—to celebrate," suggested Osborne.

"That's a much better idea."

There was a silence while they stirred their coffee. Raleigh caught Osborne's eye, and smiled a little awkwardly.

"How d'you feel?" asked Osborne.

"All right."

"I've got a sort of empty feeling inside."

"That's just what I've got," Raleigh confessed.

"Wind up!"

"I keep wanting to yawn."

"That's it. Wind up. I keep wanting to yawn too. It'll pass off directly we start."

Raleigh took a deep breath. "I wish we could start now."

Osborne leant forward to look at his watch on the table. "We've got eight minutes yet."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Raleigh.

"Let's just have a last look at the map." He drew the map towards him, and the two pored over it in the dim light. "Directly the smoke's thick enough, I'll give the word. You run straight for this point here . . ."

"When I get to the Boche wire I lie down and wait for you."

"Don't forget to throw your bombs."

Raleigh patted his bulging pockets. "No, I've got them here."

"When I shout 'Righto!' in you go with your eight men. I shall lie on the Boche parapet, and blow my whistle now and then to show you where I am. Pounce on the first Boche you see, and then we'll come back like blazes."

"The whole thing will be over quite quickly?" asked Raleigh.

"I reckon, with luck, we shall be back in three minutes."

"As quick as that?"

"I think so. And now let's forget all about it for" —he glanced at his watch again—"for six minutes."

"Oh, Lord, I can't!"

"You must."

"How topping if we both get the M.C."

"Yes," agreed Osborne. "Your coffee sweet enough?"

"Yes, thanks. It's jolly good coffee. I wonder what the Boche are doing over there now?"

"I don't know. Do you like coffee better than tea?"

"I do for breakfast." After a short pause he went on: "Do these smoke-bombs make much row when they burst?"

"Not much," said Osborne. "Personally, I like cocoa for breakfast."

"I'm sorry," laughed Raleigh.

"Why sorry? Why shouldn't I like cocoa for breakfast?"

" I don't mean that. I mean—I'm sorry to keep talking about the raid. It's so difficult to talk of anything else. I was just wondering—will the Boche retaliate in any way after the raid ? "

" Bound to, a bit."

" Shelling ? "

They must get away from the subject ! Osborne began to quote :

> " ' The time has come,' the walrus said,
> ' To talk of many things :
> Of shoes, and ships and sealing wax,
> Of cabbages and kings. ' "

" ' And why the sea is boiling hot,' " Raleigh chimed in, " ' And whether pigs have wings.' "

" Now we're off ! " said Osborne. " Quick, let's talk about pigs ! Black pigs or white pigs ? "

" Black pigs. In the New Forest you find them quite wild."

" You know the New Forest ? "

" Rather ! My home's down there. A little place called Alum Green, just outside Lyndhurst."

" I know Lyndhurst well."

" It's rather nice down there."

" I like it more than any place I know," declared Osborne, thinking less of this self-appointed task of keeping Raleigh's mind off the raid than of the long walks he had had in the forest with his rucksack and pipe, his sandwiches and a strong ash stick.

" I think so too," agreed Raleigh. " Of course, it's different when you've always lived in a place."

"You like it in a different way."

Raleigh's diffidence dropped from him and he spoke with enthusiasm.

"Yes. Just behind our house there's a stream called the Highland. It runs for miles—right through the middle of the forest. Dennis and I followed it once, right up to its source."

"I used to walk a lot round Lyndhurst."

"I wish we'd known each other then. You could have come with Dennis and me—though I was only a kid then, of course."

"I wish I had. I used to walk alone."

"You must come and stay with us one day."

"I should like to—awfully."

"I can show you places in the forest that nobody knows about except Dennis and me. It gets thicker and darker and cooler, and you stir up all kinds of funny wild animals."

Osborne glanced at his watch.

"Is it time yet?" asked Raleigh, suddenly remembering again.

"Two minutes. Then we must go up. I wish we had a good hot bath waiting for us when we get back."

"So do I. We're having something special for dinner, aren't we?"

"How did you know? It's supposed to be a secret."

"Mason dropped a hint."

"Well, we've had a fresh chicken sent up from Noyelle Farm."

"I say!"

" And a most awful luxury—two bottles of champagne and half a dozen cigars ! One each, and a spare one in case one explodes."

" I've never smoked a cigar."

" It's bound to make you sick."

Raleigh suddenly noticed something that glistened on the table. " I say, here's your ring," he said.

" Yes. I'm leaving it here. I don't want to run the risk of losing it."

" Oh." Raleigh had a sudden dry feeling in his mouth. He put the ring down slowly.

" Well," said Osborne in his reassuring, matter-of-fact voice. " I think perhaps we ought to get ready."

" Righto," agreed Raleigh, getting to his feet, thankful that the time for movement had come.

" I'm not going to wear a belt—just my revolver, with the lanyard round my neck."

Raleigh imitated him, and gripped his revolver. " I feel better with this in my hand, don't you ? "

" Yes. Something to hold. Loaded all right ? "

" Yes."

Osborne took his pipe from his mouth and laid it carefully on the table. " I do hate leaving a pipe when its got a nice glow on the top like that," he remarked regretfully. He glanced at his old-fashioned watch for the last time. " Three minutes to. I think we'd better go."

" Righto."

Raleigh stood back as Osborne went towards the steps, and waited to follow him. Then, as he was about to go up into the pale afternoon sun, Osborne

turned, and spoke as if the words had long been in his mind but some odd shyness had forbidden them :

" I'm glad it's you and I, together, Raleigh."

" Are you—really ? " asked Raleigh eagerly.

" Yes."

" So am I, awfully."

" We must put up a good show."

" Yes. Rather ! "

Osborne glanced round the dugout. " Well, let's get along," he said.

Near the steps Mason met them.

" Good luck, sir. Good luck, Mr. Raleigh," he said. And when he returned to his own little dug-out he turned to Hammond. " It's a bleedin' shame, that's what it is ! " he declared. " And them two ! "

" Let's 'ope for the best," said Hammond sententiously.

The men filed out of the central dugout, where the Colonel had been talking to them, and took up their allotted posts in the sap. Stanhope went down the trench with a word of encouragement here, of advice there. There was a gorgeous sunset which, for some inexplicable reason, gave to Osborne a sense of confidence and well-being. Raleigh longed for the moment to come so that this awful waiting would be over. He hoped the men would not see how nervous he was. He grinned quite cheerfully at Trotter, who caught him by the arm.

" Bring us back an 'elmet, Raleigh," he said. " I've promised one to Angèle. You don't know Angèle yet, but I'll tell 'er you got it."

"Right," laughed Raleigh. "I'll try to bring one with a German inside it."

"Cheero, and good luck!"

"Cheero! Thanks." Good chap, Trotter! The sort of fellow you could trust.

"All right, Raleigh?" asked Dennis, in quite a friendly tone.

"Yes, thanks, sir." Funny to call Dennis "sir," but the men were there.

"Good. Mind you get your prisoner. Good luck!"

"Rather! Thanks."

"Don't forget how much depends on that prisoner," said the Colonel.

"Very good, sir."

Osborne had his whistle in his mouth. They all waited, crouching under the parapet. Through a periscope Stanhope could see the narrow gap in the German wire and the sinister strips of red rag fluttering gently on each side of it.

Suddenly came the sound they had been waiting for—the dull thud of mortar guns. Two bombs burst in No Man's Land a little to their right, leaving two small clouds of heavy smoke which spread out lazily over the ground. More shells exploded and the smoke grew thicker, completely blotting out the German trenches opposite. A German "minnie" fell close to the parapet, and the men crouching against it felt it shake under the force of the explosion. There was a good deal of shelling and frantic rifle fire, but above all the waiting men heard the insistent ominous rat-tat-tat of machine guns.

Osborne decided the smoke screen was dense

enough. Thank God the waiting was over. He blew a shrill blast on his whistle, and signalled the men to advance. Led by Raleigh, they scrambled over the parapet, slithered down into No Man's Land, and disappeared one by one into the fog. Above the bank of smoke the watchers could see alarm rockets sent up from the German trenches.

CHAPTER XXII

Night was made hideous by the bombardment, and Ernst Scheffer wondered why most of the trench mortar shells fell just short of the parapet, until the Feldwebel declared the English were preparing for an attack.

"Compared with our own attack," he boasted, "it will be like a louse biting an elephant."

But Ernst Scheffer did not see it in quite the same light.

When at last the bombardment died down and the men crouching in the trench were no longer spattered with clods of earth that were hurled skywards by explosives in No Man's Land, the trench flares showed a gap in the barbed wire almost exactly opposite where he was posted. The Feldwebel looked at it, and the Herr Leutnant looked at it, nodded his head wisely, and gave orders for every machine gun that could be spared to be trained on this breach in their defences. And just before dawn Hans Bartenstein, always up to some trick or another, came along to borrow two strips of the red, plaited-paper ribbon which had been fastened round Gretel's birthday present. Ernst Scheffer had let the ribbon go reluctantly, because anything from Gretel was precious. But the other fellows were very insistent, and so Hans Bartenstein was able to wriggle over the top of the

parapet with the ribbon held safely between his teeth. A few moments later he was back again, and the next trench flare showed flaunting red strips tied to the barbed wire on each side of the gap that had been made after so much effort by the British artillery.

"That'll give the English cold feet," Hans chuckled, and everyone came along the trench to praise him and admire his achievement.

All day long Ernst Scheffer wondered about the red ribbon. He could picture Gretel going along the Leipziger Strasse to some shop to choose a bright coloured strip—even though it were made only of paper since cottons and silks were too dear—with which to tie up the socks she had knitted so industriously for his birthday. She always loved red, and he could remember her in a red sailor blouse and skirt which went finely with her fluffy, fair hair. How astonished she would be if she could see the ribbon she had saved up to buy hanging out there on the barbed wire!

And what must the English be thinking about it? If they had to make a raid, they would all have to crowd through that one narrow gap, knowing quite well that they would be mowed down as they did so. They must be fascinated, horrified, by Gretel's ribbon. It was funny to think that, were it not for her passion for bright colours, the Englishmen might have gone all day long buoyed up by the hope that their gap was unnoticed. There was to be the big offensive to-morrow—something so big that the mind could not picture it, and Ernst Scheffer wondered

what the English were thinking about their forthcoming raid partly in order to take his mind off the offensive, and partly because these strips of flaming ribbon stirred his imagination. He felt sorry for the Englishmen who would have to face this devastating machine-gun fire.

But his sympathy soon evaporated. For, after all, they were so lucky, these Englishmen. Although the newspapers from home said they were starving, the men in the trenches knew better. They knew that the enemy had good food, good boots, and fine, thick uniforms. Ernst had seen prisoners—privates dressed better than German officers—and he had heard how a regiment which had attacked farther up the line had found tins with real butter in them, and real chocolate—luxuries such as had not been seen in Germany for years. No ; they were too lucky, these *Engländer*, and if they were going to carry out a raid he hoped one or two of them would get through the gap before they were killed, so that he might stand a chance of looting a pair of real, solid, leather boots. And he would send home their tunic buttons, one for Gretel, and one for little Gustav.

The thought of Gustav made him feel very bitter against the English ; for he blamed them because every letter Gretel sent him was full of complaints about the difficulties of getting enough food for the boy. The milk ration was hopelessly small, and there was practically no meat obtainable. Poor Gretel ! She had always been so cheerful in the old days, and she had been the life and soul of every *Ausflug* to Wannsee or Potsdam, Muggelsee or the Spreewald.

And now she did nothing but complain of the difficulties of keeping house, or the idiosyncrasies of her mother-in-law, who had come to live with them owing to the shortage of flats. It was a pity that two people whom he loved, his wife and his mother, should hate each other so that they could only be friendly when he was with them. And when would he get leave again? That was another complaint he had against the English : it was said that they got leave every four months or so. It wasn't fair. . . .

His reflections were cut short by the bursting of two shells in No Man's Land—unusual shells, for the smoke from them developed into a thick cloud, which rolled northwards with awe-inspiring stateliness, so that it blotted out the British trenches opposite. There was confusion in the trench, quickly dispelled by the Herr Leutnant, calling out to the men to concentrate their fire on the gap.

The smoke screen was so dense that you couldn't see anybody moving, but there were men coming across No Man's Land—there could be no doubt about that, because the machine-guns were firing like mad, and even above the regular, mechanical din they made, Ernst Scheffer heard somebody scream out there. A flash of pity went through him. Then a hand-grenade burst on the parapet a few yards away to the left, and anger succeeded pity. He'd teach these damned *Engländer*! He blazed away into the fog, and became a mere automaton working steadily and efficiently to kill.

There was a violent explosion just beside him. A grenade had burst in the trench and he, almost

miraculously, was not hit. Karl Rainer, standing beside him, had sheltered him, and Karl subsided slowly without a groan. The English were forgotten, for Karl was Ernst Scheffer's friend, and, whatever the Herr Leutnant said about leaving one's colleagues in an attack, Karl had to be looked after. There were other men lying wounded, and Burchardt, squealing like a pig, was wriggling about in agony on the floor of the trench. The smoke, blowing over the lines, made everything appear uncertain and indistinct, muddled and confused, as in a nightmare.

Ernst Scheffer bent down over Karl to see how badly he was hit. A piece of the grenade had broken the bone in his right wrist, so that the hand seemed to hang by muscles, skin and veins alone. And there was a deep tear in his tunic across his chest. There was no time for him to dress the wounds now, but he would try to make Karl more comfortable in the dugout, and then come back to him as soon as the attack was over. He was just bending down to get his friend under the arms when he felt a blow on the nape of his neck and someone jumped on his back from above. He fell over on poor Karl, who groaned. Before he could get up two men clutched hold of him and swung him up on to the parapet. One of them caught him round the middle, hoisted him over his shoulder, and began jogging over No Man's Land with him. Ernst Scheffer was still confused and dazed—the whole thing had happened so quickly—but he knew where he was going because he saw, a few inches from his face, a strand of wire with Gretel's red ribbon on it. He struggled violently,

but in a few seconds his captor gave a heave, and he fell over a high parapet into a trench, where he lay trying to collect his thoughts.

The man who had carried him was an officer, who leant against the parapet panting so deeply that he seemed to be sobbing. The soldiers all round him wore British uniforms. Ernst Scheffer was a prisoner of war.

He scrambled to his feet and stood with his back against the wall of the trench. Would they kill him? There were so many stories, there must be so many cases, of prisoners who never reached a prison camp. Suppose they did kill him, Gretel would never know what had happened to him. He would be reported missing, and she would wonder for months, possibly for years, whether she ought to wear mourning for him. She was such a conventional little body that it would worry her intolerably, and Ernst Scheffer felt sorry for her, and for his small son who would never know how his father had died. All these Englishmen were discussing him and his fate. While he stood with his back to the wall he could not be stabbed from behind, but the evening sun glinted ominously on their fixed bayonets. Still dazed and frightened by the muddle and noise of the raid, and by the sight of Karl Rainer's hanging, bleeding hand, he began to whimper to himself.

"Now then Jerry, stop that row, for 'eving's sake," a man urged him. "'Ere's the Colonel coming."

Ernst Scheffer did not understand, but an elderly officer with iron-grey hair and a white moustache stood before him, and automatically he jumped to

attention. The officer gave a curt order and disappeared. Somebody signed to the prisoner to follow him, and, with two guards, he set out down a long communicating trench to a large dugout, which was obviously battalion headquarters. The men stared at him with a curiosity which had more of commiseration than of hostility about it, but, obsessed as he was by the idea that prisoners were often fated to be killed, he shuffled along, head down and arms hanging loosely at his sides.

As they entered the dugout where the Colonel was sitting, the sergeant-major snatched the German's cap off his head in the approved orderly-room manner. More frightened than ever, Ernst Scheffer began to whimper again, and went down on his knees.

"Mercy—mister—mercy!" he begged.

The Colonel looked acutely embarrassed; and the sergeant-major took the prisoner by his collar and drew him to his feet.

"Come on, sonny," he ordered in a deep tone which was meant to be reassuring, "we ain't going to 'urt you."

Years ago the Colonel had spent two holidays in Germany—one on the inevitable trip up the Rhine, and one listening to music in Dresden. He sought painfully in his memory for long-forgotten words.

"Was ist sein Regiment?" he demanded.

Addressed by an officer in something he could recognise as his own language, Ernst Scheffer pulled himself together. His whimpering ceased, and he stood to attention.

"Wurtembergisches."

"Was ist der Nummer von sein Regiment?"

"Zwanzig."

"Wann kommen Sie hier?"

"Gestern abend."

"Wo kommen Sie hier?"

"Mein Geburtsort?" asked Ernst Scheffer.

"What's that? 'Geburtsort'?" The Colonel was momentarily at a loss.

It was the German's turn to remember the English he had learnt so painfully at school. He remembered, with sudden vividness, walking back through a cornfield from the Hochschule, and reciting long English sentences to himself to while away the time. In due course he had learnt how to write a straightforward business letter, beginning: "Dear Sir, I am in receipt of your favour of the 10th instant," but they had not foreseen that his relations with the English might be other than commercial. Nobody had taught him what sentences to use to preserve his own life when he was made prisoner of war.

"You wish to know," he stammered, "where I am born?"

"No. What town did you come up to the line from?"

During rare periods of rest, the Herr Leutnant had lectured them on the danger of giving secrets to the enemy. This English officer would be very angry, but he must not be told where the battalion had been stationed, or anything else which would give him information about the attack. Ernst Scheffer felt a new patriotic heroism coursing warmly through his veins. Come what might, he would not speak.

He drew himself up to his full height, so that, despite his badly-cut, shabby grey tunic, he looked quite impressive.

"That I do not say," he declared.

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders. He had not done so badly; they had got their prisoner, identified his regiment, and found out when he had come into the line. That ought to please the "Brass Hats" all right.

"Search him," he ordered the sergeant-major.

Ernst Scheffer repressed his desire to resist, for resistance was so obviously futile. The sergeant-major emptied his pockets one by one. First came a pay-book, which the Colonel took up with eager satisfaction. Then a bit of string, made out of twisted paper, a pocket knife, a little box of the fruit-drops Gretel had sent him for his birthday, a worn stump of pencil, and then a pocket-case, the case containing all his letters. The German tried to snatch it out of the sergeant-major's hand.

"*Geben Sie mir das zurück*," he pleaded. "That is —private. Let—me—please—keep that."

"'Ere, stop that!" the sergeant-major ordered, and all Gretel's letters, recounting her quarrels with her mother-in-law, and the difficulty of obtaining food for the baby, were handed over to the Colonel who examined them with interest.

"Letters," he grunted contentedly. "Ought to be useful. Give him back his other things, except the penknife. I'll talk to him again later."

"Very good, sir," said the sergeant-major. "'Ere you are, sonny."

Ernst Scheffer, crimson with shame that all Gretel's letters would be made public property, took back his belongings, clicked his heels together smartly, bowed to the Colonel, and followed the sergeant-major to another dugout where he was given tea and cigarettes by his guards.

The Colonel lit a cigar, puffed away contentedly at the roof of the dugout, and then began to study the letters before they were sent on to Brigade Headquarters, to be annexed by the Military Intelligence people. He had not spent more than a couple of minutes at his task before he jumped to his feet with a little exclamation of annoyance. In his excitement about the prisoner he had forgotten all about the raiding-party itself. He gave hurried instructions to his Adjutant to communicate information about the prisoner to Headquarters, and strode up the narrow trench to the support line again.

"Where's Captain Stanhope?" he asked the first man he met.

"In 'is dugout, sir. Jest saw 'im go down."

The Colonel hurried down the steps, still excited by the success of the raid. "Splendid, Stanhope!" he announced. "We've got all we wanted. 20th Wurtembergers! His regiment came into the line last night. The Brigadier will be very pleased about it. It's a feather in our——"

He broke off a little suddenly as, for the first time, he caught sight of the other's face.

"How awfully nice," said Stanhope, in a slow, dead voice, "if the Brigadier's pleased."

"Oh—er—what about the raiding party? Are they all safely back?"

"Did you expect them to be all safely back, sir?" There was a pause: then Stanhope spoke again. "Four men and Raleigh came safely back."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's—er—six men, and—er—Osborne?"

"Yes."

"Poor Osborne!"

"Still, it'll be awfully nice if the Brigadier's pleased."

"Don't be silly, Stanhope. Do you know how it—what happened to Osborne?"

"A hand-grenade. While he was waiting for Raleigh."

"And the others?"

"Machine-gun bullets, I suppose."

Stanhope looked so bitter and so tired that all the excitement about the prisoner died out of the Colonel's face. He fidgeted uneasily, seeking for suitable words, when none were suitable. "What about Raleigh?" he asked, to change the subject. "Where is he?"

Stanhope nodded towards Raleigh's dugout, and then went across to the entrance and called him.

At the second summons, Jimmy Raleigh got slowly to his feet and came into the larger dugout. His hands were bleeding, and his uniform had been torn in two or three places by the barbed wire. He walked almost as though he were asleep, and a

frown of bewilderment appeared on his forehead when the Colonel greeted him with enthusiasm.

"Very well done, Raleigh," said the Colonel. "Well done, my boy. I'll get you a Military Cross for this! Splendid!"

Jimmy Raleigh looked at the Colonel as though he did not understand. All he saw was Osborne lying on the parapet, dead. All he heard was the explosion of hand-grenades, and the soft "swish-swish" of bullets passing near him, as he ran back with his German prisoner. He swayed, and would have fallen had the Colonel not caught him by the arm, and made him sit down on the edge of Osborne's bed.

"All right?" he asked, and hurried away with an excuse about telephoning to the Brigadier.

From the trench came the grumbling of distant artillery. In his dugout Mason clattered tin cups and plates about. Stanhope and Raleigh sat in silence, the one staring aimlessly at Osborne's watch and ring, the other, with his head lowered, looking at the palms of his hands. The glow of the first Very light rose and faded against the evening sky.

At last Stanhope rose stiffly to his feet, and walked slowly towards the dugout steps. He paused as he saw Jimmy sitting on the edge of the bed.

Jimmy looked very like a schoolboy again, except for the bewilderment in his eyes. The Colonel meant well, but he'd forgotten how one felt things when one was young. It wasn't much good talking to a boy about the Military Cross when he had just seen

unromantic and ugly death for the first time. He needed sympathy, not enthusiastic praise, to relieve the shock of Osborne's end. After all, especially since that business with the letter, Jimmy must have depended a lot upon Osborne. There had been nobody else to whom he could turn—Trotter wouldn't have understood, Hibbert would have been worse than useless, and he himself had so deliberately snubbed and hurt the boy. He must put things right somehow.

But even as he moved towards Raleigh, sitting on Osborne's bed, he realised his own loss to the full. That was the worst of it ; everyone, and most of all himself, had depended so much upon old Uncle. It had really been Uncle who commanded the company with his quiet, honest good-humour. He was the sort of fellow who deserved all the decorations, and who hardly ever got them. Lying across the bed was the rough woollen khaki muffler, with lots of stitches dropped, which Osborne had received from some old aunt at Christmas. The presence of the lifeless, woollen rag so sharpened the picture of Osborne which Stanhope carried in his mind that he could hardly believe Uncle was not sitting there, by Jimmy, on the edge of the wire-covered bed. He could hardly believe it, but he knew it wasn't true. He knew that he would never again confide his difficulties to that quiet, friendly man ; never again listen to his advice, given with such hesitation and delicacy, lest it should offend ; never again feel that, even though Madge and Jimmy, the Colonel and the men, should misunderstand, here was one man who

understood and sympathised. By the death of Uncle his own burden of responsibility was doubled, and he knew he could not bear it. He turned to Raleigh.

"Must you sit on Osborne's bed?" There was more of appeal than of reproach in his voice.

"Sorry."

Jimmy Raleigh rose unsteadily and went into his own dugout. It was blessedly empty, and he flung himself down in his blanket, longing for sleep so that he might forget how empty and lonely life had become.

CHAPTER XXIII

The dugout had never been so brightly illuminated before. No fewer than five candles stood on the table, thrust into the mouths of empty bottles, and two more were stuck with their own grease on to narrow slats of wood wedged into crevices in the wall. Their flickering light glistened on the oozing damp of the sandbags and the wooden supports which held up the rough beams of the corrugated iron and the piled up earth which gave the dugout some protection from enemy shell-fire. Almost every inch of the sugar-box table was covered with dirty plates and mugs, and towering above it all were two aristocratic bottles of champagne. Hibbert, his usually pale face flushed and his hair untidy, sat on Stanhope's bed while Stanhope himself and Trotter, his tunic generously unbuttoned, balanced themselves on the wooden cases which played the part of chairs. The joint supply of limericks and dirty stories was coming to an end, but the least remark sufficed to send Hibbert off into high-pitched, excited laughter. His thin, white fingers nervously twitched the ash from his cigar, while there was a reassuring and comfortable air about Trotter's cigar, embedded in his podgy fingers. Stanhope, his elbows leaning on two small vacant patches of table, egged the others on with bitter anecdotes of his last leave in Paris.

" Oh, skipper, you are a scream and no mistake," gurgled Trotter through his wheezy laughter.

Hibbert started off on a long story of his own. " I'll never forget picking up a couple of ' tarts ' one night and taking them out to dinner," he began.

Trotter winked at Stanhope. " 'E's off again," he whispered huskily.

" We drank enough bubbly to sink a battleship. . . . "

" Float a battleship," Stanhope interrupted.

" Well, to float a battleship. Then I took them for a joy ride out to Maidenhead—did sixty all the way. We danced a bit at Skindles and drank a lot of port and muck. Then damned if I didn't lose the way going back and got landed miles from anywhere, and those two began cursing me like hell. Said I'd done it on purpose. I said if they didn't damn well shut up I'd chuck them both out into the road and leave 'em."

Stanhope rolled his cigar into the corner of his mouth. " Hurrah," he said ironically, " that's the stuff. Treat 'em rough."

Hibbert giggled with joy at the skipper's appreciation. " That shut 'em up all right," he went on. " Then I started doing about sixty down all sorts of roads. I went round a corner on two wheels with those girls' hair on end. Didn't have any more trouble from them."

He chuckled at the memory and took an unsteady gulp of champagne.

" You are the sort of man," Stanhope assured him, " who makes girls hard to please."

Trotter felt that it was time for him to take some share in the conversation. "Well, I never 'ad no motor-car," he said heavily, "my old lady and me used to walk. Legs is good enough for me."'

"Are you satisfied with legs?" asked Stanhope.

"I am, yes."

"Much cheaper," commented Stanhope, and Hibbert burst into shrill laughter.

"That's damn good," he said.

Stanhope shared out what was left of the champagne and raised his mug.

"Well, here's a toast to legs, God bless 'em."

"Good old legs," echoed Hibbert, raising his mug.

"Shanks's mare," said Trotter, raising his.

"Shanks's what?" asked Stanhope.

"Shanks's mare they call 'em."

"Call what?"

"Why, legs, of course," replied Trotter, looking surprised.

Hibbert almost screamed with delight.

"Oh, Trotter, you are a dream."

Trotter felt that somebody somewhere was trying to be offensive. With immense dignity he did up one of the buttons of his tunic, then he glared at Hibbert reprovingly.

"You've 'ad too much champagne, you 'ave," he declared, but Hibbert noticed neither the words nor the look, for he had pulled out his pocket case and produced some picture postcards.

"I've never shown you these, have I?" he asked, and he handed them over to Stanhope. From among them fell a letter which lay for a minute or two

among the cups and plates before he noticed it and put it back, rather shame-facedly, into his pocket. It was a letter he had had only that morning from his mother in Cheltenham, a letter so full of praise for his courage out here in France that he would have torn it up in anger, only for some indefinable reason he had not dared to do so. . . .

Sitting in her rather poorly furnished, lonely little house, Mrs. Hibbert must sometimes have wondered about her son, have read between the lines of his letters. On her side of the family most of the men had been in the Army and she would look up at the miniatures of them which hung in the alcove near the fireplace for fresh courage and fresh belief. Her husband's health had never allowed him to think of a strenuous career, but he, too, had concentrated his hopes on this one son whom, with so much difficulty, they had been able to send to a public school as a first step towards Woolwich and the Royal Engineers. And when the time and the chance came, he had so definitely sought for excuses to put off being sent on foreign service that his mother must sometimes have wondered. She had been ready enough with excuses and explanations when she talked about him to the other women whom she met at sewing parties. There had been his strained ankle, the result of a fall off his horse at his first jump at the riding school, which had become almost epic as she told of it while a group of them sat in a circle sewing talc eye-pieces into useless gas helmets. Influenza had very nearly become pneumonia in her account of it in a room where a dozen women were busily rolling bandages for the

local V.A.D. hospital. His first adventures at the Front, which, out of affection for her, he had in no wise exaggerated, had been coloured and heightened by her imagination, so that even the tradespeople to whom she gave her modest orders half expected to read that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. And yet, perhaps, all this boasting, even this letter which he now held, had been written as much to encourage herself as her son. Perhaps the praise it contained was the measure of her own lack of confidence in him. He thrust the pages of neat sloping writing back into his pocket, and, with a queer feeling of hopeless loneliness, turned his attention to the welcome given to his photographs.

"Where did you get them?" asked Stanhope.

"In Bethune." He peered over Stanhope's shoulder. "*She*'s all right, isn't she?"

"Too fat."

"Oh, I don't know. I wouldn't mind meeting her."

"Much too fat. What do you think, Trotter?"

Trotter propped his cigar stump up against a plate, took his pince-nez carefully out of his breast pocket, balanced them on his fat nose, and studied the photograph.

"All right, isn't she?" asked Hibbert anxiously.

"Well, I don't know. If you ask me, I'd just as soon see a good picture of Margate Pier."

Hibbert made an exclamation of disgust. "You don't understand anything about *Art*," he stated, and turned back to Stanhope, who was examining another postcard.

"Legs too thin," he commented. "Aren't they, Trotter?"

"Scraggy, I call 'em," said Trotter after due reflection.

Stanhope came to the last of the photographs. "She's all right," he agreed, and then laid it down with the others on the table.

"That's the one I like best," declared the delighted Hibbert. "Ever see that show *Zip* at the Hippodrome? Couple of damn fine girls in that—twins. Did you see 'em, skipper?"

Stanhope shook his head wearily. "I don't know. Seen stacks of shows—can't remember them all." He made sure that the champagne bottles were empty, but brightened up when he remembered whisky. He shouted to Mason to bring a bottle.

"What? Whisky on top of champagne?" asked Trotter, with the least inflection of reproach in his voice.

"Why not? It's all right."

"Well, it doesn't sound right to me. I feel as if somebody's blown me up with a bicycle pump. Any'ow, it was a jolly fine bit of chicken, and I'd go a mile any day for a chunk of that jam pudding."

Mason appeared with a bottle of whisky.

"Your pudding's made Mr. Trotter feel all blown out, Mason," Stanhope told him.

"I'm sorry, sir. It wasn't meant, sir. It was only boiled ration biscuits and jam." Then he went on to announce that there was no more whisky after the bottle he carried in his hand.

"Why, damn it," protested Stanhope, "we brought six."

"I know, sir, but five's gone."

"Where the devil's it gone to?"

Mason put the bottle down so that he might have both hands free for counting purposes, but he had only recalled the drinking of the first bottle on the first night when Stanhope stopped him with a weary gesture. "For the Lord's sake don't go through them one by one. This'll last until sunrise. Who's for a spot?"

"Tea for me," Trotter declared. "I'm about full up. I'd like a nice cup of tea, Mason. Still, I'll just 'ave a spoonful of whisky. Got a touch of pulpitations."

"You'll have a decent spot, won't you, Hibbert?"

"Yes, I'm game."

Mason brought Trotter's tea with a rapidity which led to the suspicion, confirmed by the taste, that the stuff had been stewing in the dixie. Trotter, however, drank it with appreciation.

"Now I'll go and relieve young Raleigh," he said, wiping his mouth with a large khaki cotton handkerchief. "Pity 'e didn't come down to supper."

"I told him to," Stanhope declared in a querulous voice. "I told him to come down for an hour and let the sergeant-major take over."

"That lad's too keen on his 'duty,'" said Hibbert. "He told me he liked being up there with the men better than down here with us."

Stanhope became as alert and as outwardly calm as he would have done had the Germans made a

sudden attack. But, within, he was filled with an angry jumble of sentiments—that jealousy which he had often felt where Raleigh was concerned, resentment against a boy whom he knew he had wronged, loneliness because everything conspired to remind him of Osborne, misery because it seemed to him Madge was now irrevocably lost. "He said that?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. I told him about the chicken and champagne and cigars, and he stared at me and said: 'You're not having that, are you?'—just as if he thought we were going to chuck it all away."

"I reckon that raid shook 'im up more than we thought. I like that youngster." If Trotter had had it in him to be malicious, there would have been malice in his words as he addressed them to Hibbert. "Strong lad, too—the way he came back through the smoke after the raid, carrying that Boche under his arm like a baby."

Stanhope was paying no attention to Trotter. "He actually told you he preferred being up there with the men to being down here?" he insisted.

"That's what he said."

"Well, I 'ope 'e gets the M.C., that's all," went on Trotter, arguing against a sensed resentment towards Raleigh. "'E's just the sort of kid I'd 'ave liked if we'd ever 'ad a kid. Strong and plucky."

"Oh, for God's sake, forget that bloody raid," burst in Stanhope. "Think I want to talk about it?"

Trotter looked surprised, and almost offended. "No—but, after all——"

"Well, shut up!"

"All right! All right!" said Trotter, moving uneasily on his box.

"We were having a jolly decent evening till you started blabbing about the war."

"*I* didn't start it."

"You did."

"You began it about——"

"Well, for God's sake, stop it, then."

"All right! All right!"

"Did I ever tell you the story about the girl I met in Soho?" began Hibbert, trying to be tactful and to bring back the cheery atmosphere which had so suddenly vanished.

"I don't know," said Stanhope, "I expect you did."

"It'll amuse you," Hibbert assured him, undismayed. "I'd been to a dance and was coming home quite late——"

"Yes, and it's late now," Stanhope interrupted. "You go on duty at eleven. You'd better go and get some sleep."

"I'm all right. I'm as fresh as a daisy."

"You may be, but go to bed."

"What?" asked Hibbert, unable to believe that his cheery evening was thus abruptly coming to an end.

"I said 'go to bed.'"

"I say, that's a nice way of ending a jolly evening!"

"I'm sorry. I'm tired."

"Well, *you* better go to bed," suggested Hibbert perkily

Stanhope stared at him, and he sniggered.

"What was that you said?"

"I was only joking."

"I asked you what you said."

"I said, 'You better go to bed,'" Hibbert admitted, with a ghost of a snigger.

Stanhope glared, his face flushed with anger. "Clear out of here," he ordered.

Hibbert rose unsteadily. "What—what d'you mean?"

"Get out of here, for God's sake!"

"I say," blustered the other. "Look here——"

"Get out of my sight," shouted Stanhope, with such intensity that Hibbert made no further reply, but sneaked away to his dugout.

"Little worm gets on my nerves," Stanhope declared, as much to the dugout as to Trotter.

"Poor little bloke. Never seen 'im so cheerful before."

"Doesn't he nearly drive you mad?"

"Well, I never did care for 'im, as you might say, but I reckon 'e only wanted to keep cheerful."

"Doesn't his repulsive little mind make you *sick*? I envy you, Trotter. Nothing upsets you, does it? You're always the same."

"Always the same, am I?" echoed Trotter, sighing into his empty tea mug. "Little you know!"

"You never get sick to death of everything, or so happy you want to sing."

"I don't know. I whistle sometimes."

"But you always *feel* the same."

Trotter was not in a mood for confidences. " I feel all blown out now," he remarked. " I'll go and relieve young Raleigh. Pity 'e didn't come down to supper."

He stood up, tried to button his tunic, but without success, and buckled his webbing belt over his paunch. He put on his helmet and respirator bag. Then he picked up a packet from the table.

" 'Ere's 'Ibbert's postcards," he said. " Funny a bloke carrying pictures like this about. Satisfies his lust, I s'pose—poor little fellow ! " He put the cards carefully into his own tunic pocket, said " Cheero ! " to Stanhope, and went towards the dugout steps.

" You realise that you're my second in command now, don't you ? " Stanhope called after him.

" Well, you 'adn't said nothing about it, but——"

" Well, you are."

" Righto, skipper. Thanks. I won't let you down." And Trotter went off quite jauntily to relieve Raleigh, leaving Stanhope staring with disgust at the dirty cups and plates on the table.

Presently he raised his head, and called to Mason to bring Mr. Raleigh's dinner. Mason brought in a steaming plate of food and went away with some of the dirty crockery, just as Raleigh came down the steps. He paused at the bottom, took off his helmet and hesitated.

" I thought I told you to come down to dinner at eight o'clock ? " said Stanhope.

" Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think you—er——"

" Well ? You didn't think I—er—what ? "

" I didn't think you'd—you'd mind—if I didn't."

" I see. And why do you think I asked you if I didn't mind ? "

" I'm sorry."

" Well," went on Stanhope, changing his tone a little, " we've kept your dinner. It's ready for you here."

" Oh, it's awfully good of you to have kept it for me, but I—I had something to eat up there."

Stanhope's voice became cold and hard again.

" You—you had something to eat up there ? What do you mean exactly ? "

" They brought round the tea while I was on duty——"

" Are you telling me that you've been feeding with the men ? "

" They asked me to share."

" Now, look here. I know you're new to all this, but I thought you'd have the sense to leave the men alone to their meals. D'you think they want an officer prowling round, eating their rations and sucking up to them ? "

" Why did they ask me if they didn't mean it ? "

" Don't you realise they were making a fool of you ? "

" Why should they ? " asked Raleigh.

" So you know more about my men than I do ? "

" I'm sorry, then—if I was wrong."

" Sit down," said Stanhope.

" It's all right, thanks."

Stanhope's voice rose to a shout. " Sit down." Then he went on more quietly. " I understand you prefer

being up there with the men than down here with us."

"I don't see what you mean?"

"What did you tell Hibbert?"

"Hibbert? I didn't say——"

"Don't lie."

Raleigh's voice was nearly as angry as Stanhope's. "I'm not lying," he declared. "Why should I lie?"

"Then why didn't you come down?"

"I—I wasn't hungry. I had rather a headache. It's cooler up there."

"You insulted Trotter and Hibbert by not coming down. You realise that, I suppose?"

"I didn't mean to do anything like that."

"Well, you did. You know now, don't you?"

Raleigh made no reply. He was trying to understand why Stanhope's temper had risen to a trembling fury.

"I say—you *know* now, don't you?" repeated Stanhope in a voice which he could scarcely control. "My officers work *together*. I'll have no damned prigs."

"I'm sorry. I'll speak to Trotter and Hibbert. I didn't realise . . ." He broke off, for he was staring, fascinated and horrified, at Stanhope's hand which shook so violently that he could scarcely place his cigarette between his lips.

"What are you looking at?" asked Stanhope.

Raleigh lowered his head. "Nothing."

"Anything *funny* about me?"

"No." After a moment of silence he went on, in a halting voice. "I'm awfully sorry, Dennis, if—if I annoyed you by coming to your company."

"What on earth are you talking about? What do you mean?"

"You resent my being here."

"Resent your *being* here? I don't know what you mean. I resent your being a damned fool, that's all. Better eat your dinner before it's cold."

"I'm not hungry, thanks."

"Oh, for God's sake, sit down and eat it like a man!"

"I can't eat it, thanks."

"Are you going to eat your dinner?"

There was a harsh command in Stanhope's metallic voice, but it brought a cry from the boy who stood quivering before him with an arm stretched wildly towards the dark steps that led into the night. It was a sudden cry for mercy—"Good God! Don't you understand? How *can* I sit down and eat that—when—when Osborne's—lying out there. . . ."

Stanhope rose slowly, his eyes wide and staring. He was fighting for his breath, and his words came fiercely, brokenly. "My God! You bloody little swine! You think I don't care—you think you're the only soul that cares!"

"And yet you can sit there and drink champagne, and smoke cigars. . . ."

It was as though Stanhope did not hear the interruption. "The one man I could trust," he went on. "The one man I could talk to as man to man—who understood everything—and you think I don't care. . . ."

"But how can you when . . . ?"

" To forget, you little fool, to forget ! Don't you understand ? To forget ! You think there's no limit to what a man can bear ? " He turned quickly from Raleigh and went to the dark corner of the dugout, by Osborne's bed. He stood with his face towards the wall, his shoulders heaving as he fought for breath. The dugout was very quiet.

At last Raleigh spoke.

" I'm awfully sorry, Dennis. I—I didn't understand."

Stanhope made no reply.

" You don't know how—I——"

" Go away, please—leave me alone."

But Jimmy Raleigh could not go like this. " Can't I——" he began.

Stanhope turned on him. " Get out ! " he begged. " For God's sake, get out ! "

Raleigh crept away quietly to his own dugout. Despite his fatigue, he lay for a long time on his blanket, staring up at the dark, smoky beams of the ceiling. Now and then he shivered slightly, as though he were feverish ; he was too bewildered and confused to put his thoughts into any clear and proper order. But, somehow, there was a general sensation of relief. The growing burden of the last few hours had shifted. At last he understood about Dennis. Osborne had gone, and nobody knew what would happen at dawn, but there was that one fact to cling on to—he was sure it *was* a fact—things would be all right again between Dennis and himself.

Stanhope lay for a long while crumpled up on Osborne's bed, his head buried in his arms. In his

sobs were concentrated all his loneliness without Osborne, the fear that Jimmy's arrival had put an end once and for all to his daydreams about Madge, the bewildering, soul-killing, ceaseless strain of routine and responsibility. In that wretched effort of the afternoon to put courage into Hibbert, he had talked of the desire to lie down and pretend that he was paralysed, to wait there until he died. He wished now that he might never have to think or move again. He had reached the limit of what a man could bear.

But at last he rose stiffly to his feet, crossed the dugout to his own bed, and lay down to snatch the last few hours of sleep before dawn.

CHAPTER XXIV

Long before it was light there was movement in the signallers' dugout. Mason busied himself with the fire, while Hammond by the light of a flickering candle made a poor attempt at washing cups which had been left dirty from the night before. Outside all was so quiet that it seemed difficult to believe there were any Germans within miles. It was bitterly cold. The only sign of the coming dawn was the gradual paling of the stars.

Mason pushed aside the curtain of the officers' dugout and touched Stanhope on the shoulder. He woke with a start—he never slept soundly now.

"Hullo," he said, "that you, Mason? What is it?"

"'Arf-past five, sir."

"Oh, right!" He sat up in his bed and stretched himself. "Damnably cold in here. You don't get a chance to sleep. Good Lord, I'm tired."

"I've made some 'ot tea, sir."

"Good! Better wake up the other officers and take them a cup."

"Very good, sir."

As soon as Mason had returned to his own dugout Stanhope got slowly to his feet and began to make ready for his work. His fingers were so cold that he fumbled angrily for several moments with his shirt-stud. His head was aching like the devil. If Jerry was

going to attack he had chosen a pretty beastly morning for it, and the dugout was so cursedly lonely now that Osborne's bed was empty—bloody cold and lonely.

As Stanhope was brushing his hair in front of the little metal mirror propped up against a jam-tin near the candle, Trotter came in from his own dug-out. His face was partly hidden by thick white lather.

" Wash and brush up, tuppence ! " he announced.

" Hullo, up already ? Good man ! The others awake ? "

Trotter nodded. Then he went across to the steps and peered up into the trench. " Sounds quiet enough out there. But you never knows, do you ? " His face lit up as Mason appeared, carrying four mugs of tea. " That's the stuff for the troops. A good cup of tea ! "

Mason put one cup down at Stanhope's elbow. " Nice and 'ot, sir. And I've cut a packet of sam-bridges for each gentleman, sir."

Then he went off to the inner dugout with the other three cups held in front of him, and Trotter, still busily lathering his face, following behind him.

Trotter was right. It was quiet enough out there. The sky was beginning to turn grey. Very nearly time for " stand to." Could it be possible that, so few yards away, the German infantry were crowded in their trenches ready to attack ; that so few miles away the German guns, camouflaged under branches or grass-covered wire netting, or deceptive blotches of paint, were waiting in their thousands for " zero hour," when they would burst into the greatest

uproar the war had known? Very quiet—even to the north by Ypres there was, for once, no noise.

Stanhope turned sharply from the dugout entrance and went to the table. After all, he had plenty of work to do. He lit a second candle, and, by its light, ran through the notes he had jotted down in his message-book.

"Mason!" he called.

"Coming, sir." He appeared with a neat packet wrapped up in newspaper. "Your sambridges, sir. 'Arf bully beef and 'arf sardine. Sardine on top, sir."

"How delicious. No *pâté de foie gras*?"

"No what, sir?"

"No *pâté de foie gras*?"

Mason hesitated before he replied. The Captain seemed in a good temper. "No, sir," he said, "the milkman ain't been yet." Then he hurried on—for you never knew with the Captain nowadays. . . . "You called, sir?"

"Yes. Clear up your kitchen a bit, dress, and join your platoon in the line."

"Very good, sir."

"If things are going well at eleven o'clock, come down here and do your best to get some lunch for us. We shall come down in turn when we get a chance."

"Very good, sir."

Stanhope turned back to his notes. "Runner!" he shouted. A signaller came in from the servants' dugout, and saluted.

"Ask the sergeant-major to come to see me."

"Very good, sir."

From the inner dugout came the sound of Trotter's voice, singing plaintively " There's a long, long trail a-winding." No chance to work with a row like that going on. What an odd bird, too ! Nothing ever upset him. Stanhope's scowl disappeared. He pulled a few coppers from his pocket, walked across to the entrance of Trotter's dugout, and threw the money inside. The singing stopped abruptly.

" Thank you kindly, guv'nor ! " Trotter called out in his cheery voice.

The sergeant-major had arrived, and stood at the foot of the steps, stiff, inscrutable, and correct until Stanhope spoke to him, when he became human. He reported that the wiring parties had just finished their work, and had made a very decent job of it, with wire on each side of the company's sector, running right down to the support line.

" Good ! Everything quiet ? "

" It's all right opposite 'ere, sir. But the guns 'ave started a 'eavy bombardment down south. Not sure if it ain't spreading this way, sir."

" Very likely. The officers will be up in a minute. They'll stand by with their platoons."

" Very good, sir."

" Are the men having their tea ? "

" Yessir."

" Let 'em have a decent drop of rum."

" About 'arf again, sir ? "

" Yes. The attack may come any time up till midday. After then, I don't suppose it will come till tomorrow. That's all, I think, sergeant-major. I'll see you up there in a minute or two."

"Very good, sir."

Stanhope went across to Trotter's dugout again. "Ready?" he called.

"All ready, skipper. Want me to go up?"

"Yes, I think so. Go right round the line and see everything's all right. I'll be up very soon. Just got a few things to settle up . . ."

His voice broke off as there came the faint whistle and thud of falling shells. The two men listened intently.

"'Ullo! 'Ullo!" said Trotter.

Stanhope strode over to the doorway and went up a few steps. "Four of them. Over on Lancer's Alley—somewhere by the reserve line," he announced.

Before he could come down again three more shells exploded. The preliminary whistle was shorter, and the thud louder.

"Blighters coming nearer."

"Yes. I think you'd better go up, Trotter. Call the others. I'll just speak to battalion headquarters."

Trotter shouted to Hibbert and Raleigh, lit a cigarette over the candle, lingered a moment, and then went slowly over to the steps. "Cheero, skipper!" he called in his hearty voice.

Now Trotter had gone. Stanhope rang up the battalion headquarters and explained where the last three whizz-bangs had fallen. Then he opened his message-book to write. As he did so Raleigh appeared.

"Do you want me to go up now?" he asked.

Stanhope lowered his head and scribbled busily in his book. "Yes, you'd better. Trotter's gone."

"Right." He walked to the foot of the steps, and then turned. "Cheero—Stanhope," he said shyly.

"Cheero, Raleigh. I shall be up in a sec." Stanhope still kept his head lowered, but the hardness had gone out of his voice. It was all right. They understood each other now.

Stanhope took a cigarette out of his case, and lifted the candle to light it. His hand trembled, and sent shadows flickering over the beams and corrugated iron of the ceiling. There was a sudden burst of machine-gun fire from close at hand, and a low, unceasing rumble of artillery away to the south. It seemed to grow in volume of sound, slowly but steadily. Better go up to see what it was all about.

"Hibbert!" he called, but there was no reply. He strode across to the inner dugout. "Hibbert! Hibbert! What the devil are you up to?"

Hibbert came in. He was terribly pale, and moved uncertainly.

"Come along, man!" Stanhope said sharply. "The others have gone up a long time ago. For heaven's sake get a move on."

Hibbert hesitated, as though he were hunting for some excuse for delay.

"Got a drop of water?" he asked.

"What do you want water for?"

"I'm so frightfully thirsty. All that champagne and stuff last night dried my mouth up."

"Here you are." Stanhope impatiently poured some water into a mug and handed it to the other. Then he walked over to the steps and stood looking up into the trench. There was a medley of noise

now—rifle-fire, uncertain and spasmodic ; the determined, relentless " tap-tap " of machine-guns ; the heavy, deep, resounding boom of *Minenwerfer* ; the short explosion of rifle-grenades ; shrapnel which burst in white clouds above the trenches. This *might* not be the prelude to the German offensive, but it was very seldom they had a " morning hate " on anything like this scale. A shell burst along the trench to the left, and it was followed by the call for stretcher-bearers. That was Hibbert's platoon. Damn the fellow ! He must get up to his men. Hibbert was still at the table, sipping his water slowly and deliberately.

" Come on, man. Buck up ! "

" There's no appalling hurry, is there ? "

" No hurry ! Why d'you think the others have gone up ? "

" What ? Trotter and Raleigh ? " He spoke as though he were talking in his sleep, so much so that Stanhope took him by the shoulder and shook him.

" Wake up, man ! " he said sharply. " What the devil's the matter with you ? "

Hibbert put the mug down slowly, but he did not move.

" The longer you stay here," Stanhope told him, " the harder it'll be to go up."

That stirred him.

" Good Lord ! " he protested. " You don't think I'm——"

" I don't think. I know ! You're just wasting as much time as you can."

" Well, damn it all, it's no good going up till I feel fit. That champagne's made my mouth feel like

a bit of blotting-paper. Let's just have another spot of water."

Stanhope waited impatiently while Hibbert took up the earthenware bottle and poured himself out another drink. The poor miserable devil's hand trembled so that much of the liquid missed the mug altogether, and splashed on to the table.

"Here, drink this too, and then clear out. I've no more time to waste."

Stanhope added some whisky to Hibbert's mug and thrust it into the other's hand. Just then Mason appeared, his grey flannel shirt and braces hidden by his tunic and equipment. He looked so unusually spick and span that one might have thought he was going on leave.

"I've made up the fire to last a good three hours," he announced, "if you don't mind me popping down about nine o'clock jest to 'ave a look at it."

"All right, Mason." Stanhope glanced from Hibbert to Mason and back again. "One second," he ordered the latter. "Just give this message to the signallers. If their telephone wire's cut they'd better send it down by runner." Then join your platoon. Mr. Hibbert and I are going up now."

He scribbled out a situation report in his Field Message Book, and gave it to Mason, who disappeared into the signallers' dugout with it.

"That gives us nearly a minute," he said to Hibbert, as he buckled on his belt and slipped his revolver lanyard over his neck. "You heard what I said to Mason. Are you coming up with me, or do you want him—and the others—to know?"

Hibbert looked at his company commander for a moment, and then, with a slight smile, he turned towards the dugout entrance.

"Right, I'm ready," he said.

In the trenches there was silence again. The shelling and nervous, uneasy bursts of rifle-fire had died away. And yet, Stanhope thought, even had he not been warned a big German attack was expected, he would not treat this silence as one treated those other pauses in the usual desultory firing known as the "morning hate." In every man's face there was a tense look. Sometimes it was difficult to arouse men to satisfactory alertness during the "stand-to"; to-day it seemed as though they were all on tiptoe. People talked of the lull before the storm—it was a hackneyed sort of phrase, but one which kept recurring to the mind this morning.

The sky was heavy with rain, but the air was not so cold as it had been, and a clammy mist was rising. As soon as he had been his round of the trenches, Stanhope warmed up, and his headache lessened. He resolutely refused to think of that vile business last night, of that lonely, convivial dinner with Hibbert and old Trotter. But at every traverse he expected to meet Osborne—tall, grey-haired, serious, and quiet, but always tolerant and understanding. It wasn't possible to think of him lying dead near the German parapet, and yet it was also not possible to avoid thinking of him. His body could not be seen even when Very lights went up. Perhaps the Germans had taken him in to bury him. Perhaps he had not been killed after all—no, there was no hope

in that direction, for Corporal Crooks had seen the damage the grenade had done to him. Perhaps his useless, empty body had slid down into some shell-hole to decay with all the other corruption and filth of No Man's Land. God ! how could one be expected to keep sane out here ? He walked a few yards down a communication trench, and took a long drink of whisky from his pocket-flask.

Raleigh's platoon was as smart as any. The firing platform had been repaired after the devastation left by Hardy's company, and the trench was decently clean. Stanhope felt an absurd warm feeling that Barford fellows did not let one down. Hibbert's men, on the other hand, looked cowed and sullen, for they knew they had no leader in the event of an attack. Sergeant Rusholme had done his best with Osborne's section, but Osborne had gone so quietly about his business that nobody had realised his value to the full until his death. In Trotter's sector, on the other hand, there was a general atmosphere of cheerfulness. Somehow this news that he had been made second in command had reached the men, and they were almost as proud about it as if they had been promoted themselves. It was odd, thought Stanhope, how wide a field of influence each officer had. Odd, and a little pathetic, for what could a young fellow straight out from school—a fellow like Jimmy Raleigh, for example—do against metal that hurtled through the air with the speed of an express train ? The whole thing was so damned unfair—men against machines, liquid fire, poison gas. And all these men, with childlike simplicity,

looked to their officer, their sergeant, or to one of themselves, to give them the example how to die. There was heroism, all right, but what was the good of heroism in a slaughter-house ?

Damn this waiting about ! Why didn't the attack begin.

Along the trench Raleigh stood gazing into No Man's Land with a periscope. It was all fantastic and weird. The whole sky was turning pale grey, and he wished Dennis were with him so that they could remember together a week-end at Freshwater, in the Isle of Wight, when they had gone out before dawn with a local fisherman to pull up the lobster-pots. They'd thought that an adventure. What kids they must have been ! There had been excitement and adventure about yesterday's raid—if only it hadn't been for that awful business about Osborne. Dodging across No Man's Land with his clear objective of one German prisoner, he had felt like a kid at school playing " French and English." But this waiting about was beastly. Osborne had said something about war being always waiting for something to happen until it *did* happen, and then starting to wait again. What a topping schoolmaster Osborne must have made. He understood so well what a fellow was thinking, that there wasn't any need to try and explain things. Surely the Germans couldn't be going to attack now. If Dennis wasn't such a keen officer he'd have let the men stand down ever so long ago.

Suddenly, without any warning, the bombardment began again. The men pressed themselves as

hard as they could against the cold, damp sandbags of the parapet. Each quarter of an inch of protection became so valuable. It was terrifying, and yet thrilling. It did not seem credible that anything made by man could produce such an infernal noise. The dawn was put to shame by the Very lights that went up from the British trenches, and the shells that were fired from the German guns. In a few seconds the British artillery began to reply, and the air was filled with strange, mysterious whistlings of flying pieces of hot metal. The men crouched lower and lower, pressed themselves tighter and tighter against the parapet. Down the trench came that ominous cry for " Stretcher-bearers."

Stanhope, hurrying along the front line to urge the men to keep a sharp look-out for any movement in the German trenches, met the sergeant-major. " Who's hit ? " he shouted.

" Corporal Ross, sir," the sergeant-major told him. " Minnie dropped in the trench at the corner. What about casualties, sir ? The shelling's pretty thick over Lancer's Alley."

" No, we can't get them down there. And it's just as bad over the Fosse way. Better not try, then. Take anyone badly hit down into the big dugout on the right. Let the stretcher-bearers do what they can there."

" Very good, sir." And the sergeant-major bustled off with his orders, while Stanhope went on his way to see how Trotter and his men were faring on the extreme left. In one place a shell had blown a hole in the parapet, and he stood near it, supervising the

hasty filling of new sandbags and the perilous job of putting them in place despite German snipers.

Suddenly a man came hurrying round the traverse. " It's Mr. Raleigh, sir," he panted.

" What ? "

" Mr. Raleigh, sir. Sergeant-major told me to tell you 'e'd been 'it. Bit of shell's got 'im in the back."

" Badly ? "

" 'Fraid it's broke 'is spine, sir. Can't move 'is legs."

" Where is he ? "

" They're just bringing him along the trench, sir."

" Tell the sergeant-major to take him down to my dugout."

" Your dugout, sir ? "

" Yes, my dugout—quickly ! "

He ran along the trench to the dugout entrance and leapt down the steps. Hurriedly he crossed to his bed, and swept a book, some papers, a muffler, and one or two odds and ends to the floor with an impatient gesture. Then he smoothed out his blanket, and rolled up his British warm to make a pillow.

The men laid Raleigh gently on the bed, and stood there awkwardly, wondering what to do next. One of them looked furtively at his palms, and wiped the blood on the sides of his trousers. Stanhope carefully spread his second blanket over the wounded boy, and looked intently at him.

" 'E's fainted, sir," one of the men volunteered. " 'E was conscious all right when we picked 'im up."

" Have they dressed the wound ? "

" They've just put a pad on it, sir. Can't do no more."

Stanhope nodded to the two men. " All right. You can go. Thanks."

Then he turned to the sergeant-major. " Go at once and bring two men with a stretcher."

" But we'll never get 'im down, sir, with them shells falling on Lancer's Alley."

Didn't the fool realise that for a wounded man up here there was no chance? That the stretcher-bearers going down the communication trench might get through with him? " Did you hear what I said? Go and get two men with a stretcher."

" Very good, sir," said the sergeant-major doubtfully, and hurried up the dugout steps.

Stanhope snatched up the big earthenware water-bottle, and poured water on his handkerchief. Very carefully he bathed Raleigh's forehead with it. Presently Raleigh gave a little moan, opened his eyes, and turned his head.

" Hullo—Dennis——" he gasped.

How criminally boyish he looked, Stanhope thought. But he merely smiled cheerfully. " Well, Jimmy, you got one quickly."

He turned a wooden case on its side, and sat down near the bed. For a time there was no sound but the rumble of the guns and the crackling of rifle-fire. Presently Raleigh spoke again in a wondering voice.

" Why—how did I get down here? "

" A couple of men brought you down."

" Something hit me in the back—knocked me

clean over—sort of winded me. Yes, I remember that. I'm all right now."

Stanhope leant forward to check his attempt to rise. "Steady, old boy," he urged. "Better just lie quietly for a bit."

Raleigh argued with the petulance of an invalid. "I'll be better if I get up and walk about. It happened once before at Rugger. D'you remember in the Junior Cup Final? I got kicked. It soon wore off. It—it just makes you numb for a bit."

The noise of the guns became so insistent that it caught his attention. "What's that rumbling noise?" he asked.

"The guns are making a bit of a row."

"Our guns?"

"No. Mostly theirs."

The two in the dugout listened to it in the awed silence of little boys excited and alarmed by the rumble and echo of thunder at night. It was exhilarating as well as terrifying, and the pale grey of the dawn was stabbed by sharp flashes of light. Stanhope knew that he ought to be up there with his men. But how badly was Jimmy hit? Could he be left alone?

He turned to him, and found that he was trying to speak.

"What is it, Jimmy?" he asked.

"I say, Dennis," came the uneasy reply, "it—it hasn't gone through, has it? It only just hit me—and knocked me down?"

It was so hard to deceive Jimmy. "It's gone through just a bit, old chap."

" I won't have to—to go on lying here ? "

" Good Lord, no. I'm going to have you taken away. Down to the dressing-station—then hospital —then home. You've got a Blighty one, Jimmy. Home again, my lad. Just think of that ! "

Home ! That meant a few weeks in clean wards, without any mud, and flowers on the table. And, after that, a few weeks' sick leave in Alum Green. Perhaps he would be able to get sent to Madge's hospital at Bournemouth. Luck had brought him to Dennis's company : why shouldn't it take him to Madge's ward ?

Stanhope, too, was thinking of Madge and Alum Green.

" You'll be able to write and tell me if there are still trout in the Highland," he said.

But one couldn't go home and leave Dennis out here. It was absurd to go back after three or four days. Raleigh stirred uneasily. " I can't be sent down the line just for a knock in the back," he protested. " I'm certain I'll be better if—if I get up."

He tried to raise himself on his elbows, but collapsed with a sudden cry. " Oh, God ! It does hurt ! " There was a new note of fear in his voice.

" It's bound to hurt, Jimmy," Stanhope told him quietly. It was almost as though it were Osborne speaking, with that friendly, comforting assurance of his.

" What's on my legs ? Something holding them down——"

" It's all right, old chap. It's just the shock—numbed them a bit."

Silence fell between them again. The dim light of the dawn, creeping down the dugout steps, made the flickering candles pale. Stanhope wondered what he had better do. He ought to be out there with the men, but he could not leave Jimmy like this. The stretcher-bearers must be along in a minute now.

" It's awfully decent of you to bother, Dennis," went on Raleigh—for now that they were friends again each knew so much of what the other was thinking. " I feel rotten lying here, with everybody else up there. Trotter—good old Trotter—and the others."

" It's not your fault, Jimmy."

" So damn silly—getting hit so soon. Is there—just a drop of water ? "

" Rather ! " Stanhope jumped to his feet, thankful to be active again. It didn't seem so beastly when he could be doing something to help. " Here we are ! " He poured some water into a mug on the table, and brought it over to Raleigh. " Got some tea-leaves in it," he announced cheerfully. " D'you mind ? "

" No, that's all right."

Stanhope put his arm gently under the boy's head, and propped him up while he drank.

" I say, Dennis," Raleigh continued, " don't you wait if—if you want to be getting on."

" It's quite all right, Jimmy. Besides, they'll be taking you down the line in no time now."

" Can you stay for a bit, then ? "

" Of course I can."

" Thanks awfully."

Silence again in the dugout—there wasn't anything to be said. Stanhope sat with his hand on Raleigh's arm. The war had fallen away from them, and they were schoolboys together again, facing something they did not quite understand, and trying not to think about it. Words would only have spoiled things, for Stanhope could not have kept his pretence of confident optimism.

But presently Raleigh spoke again, his voice very faint. " Could we have a light ? " he asked. " It's—it's so frightfully dark and cold."

" Sure. I'll fetch a candle and another blanket."

He brought the two candles that were burning on the table over as near the bed as he could, and fixed two more in empty whisky-bottles. Then he went in search of a blanket. There was nothing on Osborne's bed except some old brown paper with which someone had tried to minimise the sharp discomfort of the wire netting, so he stooped and went into the dugout which had been occupied by Trotter, Hibbert, and Jimmy himself.

It was very still while he was away. The only movement was that of the candles, flinching at the explosion of every shell ; the only noise, except from the trenches, was a tiny sound—something between a sob and a moan—which came from Raleigh.

Stanhope hurried back with two blankets over his arm. He put one down on the box upon which he had been sitting, and carefully spread the other over the wounded boy.

" Is that better, Jimmy ? " he asked cheerfully, " or would you like another one ? "

There was no reply.

"Jimmy . . ." He picked up a candle from the table, and brought it over to the bed. There was no flickering of life in Raleigh's pulse.

Very slowly he put the candle down and walked across the dugout. He stood, with his hands hanging limply at his sides, near Osborne's bed, then sat down on its edge. As he stared listlessly across at the boy lying so still beneath his blankets, the candle-flames threw up the lines on his pale, drawn face, and the dark shadows under his tired eyes. The thudding of the shells rose and fell like an angry sea beating on the granite cliffs of Cornwall, like great waves sucking back across the pebbles of the Chesil Beach at Weymouth, where he and Madge and Jimmy had spent a summer day, so long ago . . .

A soldier, his face dirty and wet with perspiration, came stumbling down the steps. He panted for breath before he could deliver his message.

"It's from Mr. Trotter, sir. Mr. Trotter says will you come at once?"

Stanhope stared at the soldier, but gave no sign that he had heard.

"Mr. Trotter, sir. He says will you come at once."

Stanhope shivered slightly, rose stiffly to his feet, and took his helmet from the table. "All right, Broughton," he said. "I'm coming."

The soldier saluted and hurried away.

He looked round the dugout for his gas-mask. It was hanging from a nail above Jimmy's bed. He

slipped it over his head, and looked down again at his friend. He ran his fingers lightly over Jimmy's tousled, fair hair, turned away, and went up the steps to the trenches.

The flame of the only candle Dennis had left alight burned lower, and the guttering wax ran down the empty whisky-bottle to the rough, wooden table. The shelling became more intense, until it rose to a great fury. There was a loud shriek of a shell, a hollow, metallic, deafening roar as it burst on the dugout roof. The shock stabbed out the candle-flame. The timber props of the door caved slowly in, sandbags fell and blocked the passage to the open air. Now the dull rattle of machine-guns, the fevered spatter of rifle-fire, and the roar of the guns came very faintly to the darkened dugout. Here and there the red dawn glowed through the jagged holes of the broken doorway.

[*From German Headquarters*

From German Headquarters communiqué :

. . . From south-east of Arras as far as La Fère we attacked the English positions.

After powerful fire by our Artillery and Minethrowers our infantry stormed in broad sectors and everywhere captured the first enemy line. . . .

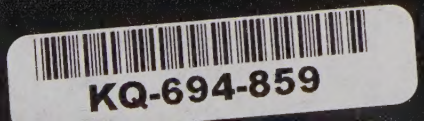
From Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's special Order to all ranks of the British Army in France and Flanders :

. . . Words fail me to express the admiration which I feel for the splendid resistance offered by all ranks of our Army under the most trying circumstances.

Many amongst us now are tired. To those I would say that victory will belong to the side which holds out the longest.

There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man : there must be no retirement.

With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end . . .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